



House of Commons Standing Committee on Health (HESA)

## The Canadian Dental Assistants' Association on Canada's Health Workforce

The Canadian Dental Assistants' Association (CDAA) is the national professional association for dental assistants in Canada. The CDAA is composed of seven provincial partner organizations and representatives from the Royal Canadian Dental Corps. As the national professional association for dental assistants in Canada for the past 77 years, the CDAA is pleased to bring forward the perspective of dental assistants on the issues facing Canada's health workforce, and those issues impacting the provision of oral healthcare to Canadians.

It is estimated there are over 60,000 licensed/certified dental assistants in Canada providing important, essential contributions to the oral health team in a variety of professional settings, both private and public. However, confirming the exact total number of working DAs in Canada is very difficult due to an uneven regulatory landscape wherein training and licensure are not required for a DA to work in Ontario, Quebec, and the Territories.

The COVID-19 pandemic has and continues to impact the health, professional and personal lives of all Canadians. This impact was acutely felt across the oral health sector when in 2020, the dental team was designated as an essential service provider to Canadians. Dental assistants returned to work while simultaneously facing many unknowns, rapidly shifting public health protocols, and a lack of personal protective equipment. In addition, dental assistants continued to work despite fearing for their safety, their patients' safety, their colleagues' safety, and the safety of their loved ones. For these reasons, the CDAA was pleased to see HESA begin this important study.

There is no doubt the contributions dental assistants have made and continue to make as essential front-line health care professionals during this global health crisis, positively impacted the overall health of Canadians. Formally trained licensed/certified dental assistants are skilled professionals who provide the highest standards in infection control protocols to ensure the safety of the public; the importance of this skill and knowledge amid a global pandemic, must not be understated. Formally trained licensed/certified dental assistants are professionals who are capable of offering many services that can contribute to improving the oral health and overall health of Canadians.

### The importance of including the private health care sector

While the CDAA appreciates HESA's focus on the care sector and especially those public health professionals who have directly treated Canadians throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDAA encourages HESA to consider studying the challenges faced by those care professions that are directly supporting the health of Canadians, but who provide their services outside of the framework of public health delivery. In addition, the CDAA recommends the Committee recognize oral health as an integral component of overall health and as a result, consider the experiences of all oral health professionals during its study.

### Uneven regulatory landscape: its impact on labour mobility and public safety.

The Canadian oral healthcare team is composed of six (6) professions: dentists; dental hygienists; dental technicians; dental therapists; denturists, and dental assistants (DAs). All of these professions are regulated in all provinces and territories throughout Canada with the exception of DAs, who are not regulated in Canada's two (2) most populated provinces: Ontario and Quebec, nor in the three (3) Territories. In addition, the scope of practice and training for DAs also varies considerably across provincial/territorial jurisdictions across the country. Despite the national exam standards established by the National Dental Assisting Examining Board, not all provinces and territories have recognized the need for regulation of the



profession and are arguably putting the public at risk by neglecting this method of accountability and oversight.

Given that DAs in most regions across the country are performing direct hands-on patient care and tasks critical to patient health and safety, prudence suggests policymakers would want regulation to maintain a record of DAs who provide such services and to ensure the standard of care is being met. Regulation, formal education and a license, registration, or practice permit need to be a requirement for all oral healthcare clinical workers as a means of ensuring safe standards are being met. Ensuring the safety of Canadians is a primary reason the CDAA advocates for a formally trained licensed/certified dental assistant workforce. Formally trained, licensed/certified dental assistants will continue to improve the health of Canadians, protect their patients, increase productivity, and contribute to building a strong economy.

The CDAA understands that in Canada, regulation of professions and licensed occupations falls under provincial/territorial jurisdiction. However, the CDAA is committed to raising awareness that an uneven regulatory environment directly impacts the provision, quality, and safety of oral health services. Greater awareness in recognizing the critical role dental assistants play as a defender of public health is a fundamental step in helping provincial/territorial governments understand that the self-regulation, formal education, licensing, and/or credentialing of dental assistants is necessary. Regulatory consistency ensures mobility between regions across the country and ensures public protection is guaranteed regardless of where an individual accesses oral healthcare provided by dental assisting practitioners.

#### Lack of dental assisting profession-specific data

For the past seven years, the CDAA has committed time and resources to gathering data on the profession, however, the need for data is ever-expanding and resources are limited. The CDAA acknowledges that without comprehensive data on dental assisting, decisions and initiatives impacting this profession will be made using incomplete data that may be unaligned with the reality of dental assistants. With limited resources, many stakeholders collecting incomplete data, and no longitudinal studies, planning, conducting trend analysis, and forecasting is a steep hill to climb for a volunteer-based association such as the CDAA, both nationally and provincially/territorially; without comprehensive data on our profession, it is difficult to effectively address the future oral health care needs of Canadians. For this reason, the CDAA suggests the federal government should lead in creating a coordinating entity that will support the collection of standardized, complete, and accurate data for all health professions, including dental assisting. Health professions need the assistance and leadership of government to ensure associations like the CDAA (who struggle with coordinating and interpreting data from various stakeholders in inconsistent formats over various timelines with differing or incomplete data), can proactively meet the evolving needs of their profession and Canadians.

#### Long-term care facilities and gaps in the provision of oral health care

The CDAA is pleased the Government of Canada is committed to improving the provision of health care services for residents of long-term care facilities. The Covid-19 pandemic brought to light the vast gaps in services, lack of oversight, and the staff shortages long-term care facilities have been navigating for many years.

Over the past several months, the CDAA has been engaged in providing feedback on the proposed national standards for long-term care facilities. In particular, the CDAA was pleased to see in the draft standard a commitment to ensure the long-term care workforce has the qualifications and skills to provide the required level of care to residents. It is for this reason, the CDAA recommends the need for oral health practitioners to support, observe, assess, and care for the oral health needs of long-term care residents. Further, it is the CDAA's position that dental assistants are uniquely trained to provide support to residents of long-term care facilities to address their oral health care needs. Government employment of dental assistants in long-term care facilities would be a logical and cost-effective means of monitoring a residents'



oral health care needs, ensuring proper daily oral care, and providing an assessment by a trained oral health professional for those conditions that would require referral to a dentist, dental hygienist, or denturist. The CDAA advocates for dental assistants to play a key role in addressing these gaps in oral health care in long-term care facilities.

### Stress and the importance of supporting mental health

The CDAA strongly believes that all dental assistants are entitled to work in a healthy environment to maintain their overall health, both mental and physical. There is no doubt that dental offices, particular during a pandemic, can be a very high stress environment. In a 2020 survey of CDAA members, 54% of DAs reported their work environment had become increasingly stressful and difficult since the beginning of the pandemic. Comparing this to the pre-pandemic findings from CDAA's 2019 *Healthy and Respective Workplace Study*, where 66% of responding DAs reported they experienced stress and 61% reported they were considering quitting their job because of it, it is not a shock to see high attrition rates across the profession. Following the pandemic, dental assistants are not unique in this regard as similar upward trending stress levels are being felt by many professionals across the care sector.

Without question, dental assistants, like all Canadians, are experiencing the toll the pandemic has taken on their mental health. The CDAA understands that these impacts are just beginning, are significant and will be long-lasting. During the pandemic, dental assistants returned to work as essential health care workers, while simultaneously facing many unknowns, rapidly shifting public health protocols, and a lack of personal protective equipment. In addition, dental assistants continued to work despite fearing for their safety, their patients' safety, their colleagues' safety, and the safety of their loved ones. There is no doubt the contributions dental assistants have made and continue to make as essential front-line health care professionals during this global health crisis, positively impacted the overall health of Canadians, and yet dental assistants often feel like the forgotten health care worker. The CDAA cannot fully address the mental health needs of dental assistants; their need for affordable, comprehensive, quality, and timely mental health services far exceeds CDAA's available resources and expertise. The CDAA advocates that governments must continue to invest in mental health resources for the health work force, including the dental assisting workforce. The CDAA urges the Committee to consider that not all front-line health care professionals have access to private health insurance coverage offered through their employer, and that the high cost of mental health services is a barrier to accessing care for dental assistants.

### Collaborating with industry colleagues

The CDAA view the issues facing the dental assisting profession and the oral health sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for inter-professional collaboration. Working together across not only the oral health sector, but across the care sector writ-large, is critical to addressing the issues facing Canada's health work force. For this reason, the CDAA is pleased to be a member of the Organization for Health Action (HEAL) where our Association can collaborate, network, and discuss issues facing the sector. In addition, earlier this year, the CDAA recently partnered with the Canadian Dental Association to submit a project proposal to the Department of Employment and Skills Development's Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program that seeks to address some of the issues facing the dental assisting workforce. As well, the CDAA will support the Canadian Health Workforce Network (CHWN), on a project focusing on addressing the harms of COVID-19 on the health of the Canadian Health Workforce.

