



April 14, 2022

Submission from the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health

RE: Study on Canada's Health Workforce

Oral health is essential overall health. In Canada, registered dental hygienists are in a prime position, as regulated health care professionals, to prevent and treat oral diseases through evidence-informed practice, oral health promotion, and fostering their clients' informed decision making related to oral health.

Dental hygienists are committed to helping all Canadians enjoy optimum health by providing individualized, accessible oral care services and treatments. Dental hygienists are essential oral health care providers.

The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) is the collective national voice of more than 30,200 dental hygienists working in Canada, directly representing 21,000 individual members, including students. Since 1963, CDHA has worked to advance the profession and promote the importance of oral health.

About Canada's Dental Hygienists

- Form the sixth largest regulated health profession in Canada with more than 30,200 practitioners.
- Are primary health care professionals who recommend and provide essential preventive and therapeutic clinical care, education, and health promotion to help improve the oral health of Canadians.
- Collaborate with other health professionals, including dentists, denturists, physicians, nurses, dietitians, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, chiropractors, and massage therapists.
- Work in a variety of settings, including private dental and dental hygiene practices, public health units, hospitals and long-term care facilities, educational institutions, dental industry, and even in clients' homes using mobile equipment.
- Can practise without the supervision of a dentist in most areas of the country; many (6%) have established their own independent dental hygiene businesses to improve access to care, especially for vulnerable populations.
- Are graduates of accredited programs offered by more than 30 colleges and universities across Canada. Dental hygienists are educated in the areas of anatomy and physiology, microbiology and infection control, pharmacology, health promotion and disease prevention, and nutrition and health.
- Must pass the National Dental Hygiene Certification Board Examination after graduating (all provinces except Québec) and then be registered or licensed by the appropriate provincial or territorial regulatory body before they can practise. These regulatory bodies ensure that dental hygienists meet the high standards required to provide quality oral health care to the public.

THE CANADIAN DENTAL HYGIENISTS ASSOCIATION
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- Are authorized in some provinces to administer local anesthesia or nitrous oxide, prescribe certain pharmaceutical agents, diagnose dental caries, provide orofacial myofunctional therapy, use lasers for periodontal therapy, and place temporary or permanent tooth restorations.

Workforce Highlights: CDHA's 2021 Job Market & Employment Survey

- The approximate unemployment rate for dental hygienists remained at 1%, which is below the current Canadian unemployment rate of 6.7% as of October 2021.
- As a female dominated profession (98%), the top reason for respondents to be on leave is maternity (43%). Just under one-in-five (17%) report being off for a disability while 15% are on leave related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Among all respondents working in dental hygiene, 94% are employees; 53% work full-time and 40% work part-time.
- The results also show that the COVID-19 pandemic has had some effect on future plans. 17% of those leaving are doing so because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace satisfaction; 12% cite early retirement as a result of the pandemic.
- 94% of respondents work in clinical dental hygiene; 75% work for a single employer.
- Only 54% of respondents have a written contract with their employer, and only 38% have an annual performance review.
- More than 9 out of 10 respondents (92%) report experiencing work-related pain in the past year.
- A significant number of respondents (10%) plan to leave the profession within the next two years while a further 18% plan to leave within three to five years. The results point to the potential for considerable turnover in the coming five years and a shortage of workforce labour.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Dental Hygienists in Canada

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the dental hygiene profession, and the entire oral health care team, have continuously supported Canadians of all ages in ensuring proper care for their oral health and helping to keep patients out of emergency rooms.

Dental hygienists have also continued to care for their regular patients, despite the risks associated with COVID-19 transmission. Managing the bacteria and disease in the mouth are essential to overall health, and even more critical during this pandemic.

During the height of the first year of the pandemic, results from CDHA's member surveys showed that:

- 87% of registered dental hygienists (RDHs) were temporarily laid off due to the pandemic and 2% lost their job *
- 91% received the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) or Employment Insurance during layoffs* have since returned to work but 34% saw a reduction in hours 91%*
- 31% worked in practices that took advantage of the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy; 28% weren't aware of the subsidy*
- 44% of dental hygienists who own their own practices say that costs have more than tripled because of necessary pandemic protocols**

Key concerns related to personal health and safety

- Treating clients who may be infectious yet asymptomatic
- Shortage of protective personal equipment (PPE), especially N95 masks and gloves
- Need for priority access to COVID-19 vaccines

Key concerns related to the oral health of Canadians

- Financial hardship or loss of dental insurance benefits (patients/clients afford oral health care)
- Restrictions on aerosol-generating procedures (preventing the provision of comprehensive dental hygiene care)

*Results from CDHA member survey, October 2020

**Results from CDHA survey of Independent Dental Hygienists, November 2020

As further context, CDHA notes a recent study¹ published by the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* that found that “the disease burden of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is not uniform across occupations”. The study found that dental hygienists, dental assistants, and dentists were the most at risk due to their close proximity and prolonged exposure to patients while providing dental and oral care. Fortunately, due to effective use of PPE and adherence to strict infection control protocols that dental hygienists follow; CDHA is not aware of any transmission of COVID-19 from patient to dental hygienist to date.

¹Zhang, M. Estimation of Differential Occupational Risk of COVID-19 by Comparing Risk Factors with Case Data by Occupational Group. *Am J Ind Med.* 2021; 64: 39- 47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.23199>

All Canadians need access to preventive oral hygiene services.

Yet for many vulnerable seniors, oral health care services are often unaffordable and inaccessible, putting them at greater risk for poor oral and overall health. That’s why seniors’ oral health has been a long-standing priority for CDHA.

According to public opinion polling results on seniors’ oral health in Canada (Conducted by Abacus Data for the CDHA, January 2022)

- 88% would like to see oral health care incorporated into the federal government’s long-awaited national standards for long-term care homes.
- A majority (over 50%) also recognize that seniors face many challenges when it comes to accessing professional oral health care.
- 86% support federal government funding for preventive and basic oral health treatments for low-income seniors.

Recommendations

In support of access to oral healthcare for vulnerable people in Canada, and the dental hygiene segment of Canada’s health workforce, CDHA calls on the federal government and Parliamentarians to:

1. Within the new federal dental program set to launch this year as announced by the Prime Minister on March 22, 2022, recognize the importance of preventive oral health care services for low-income Canadians, including the inclusion of dental hygienists as eligible providers.

2. Respond to the oral health care needs of residents living in long-term care homes across Canada through federal, provincial, and territorial collaboration, by advancing national standards for long-term care that include a focus on oral health care with:
 - i. Addition of dental hygienists to care teams
 - ii. Routine oral health assessments and daily mouth care services for residents
 - iii. Oral health education for staff
3. Invest \$2 billion over five years to help provinces and territories develop and expand oral health programs (preventive and basic oral health care services) for vulnerable seniors living in long-term care residences and at home.
4. Accelerate the federal government's plan to expand its list of eligible professionals under the student loan forgiveness program, to help bring more dental hygienists to the rural and remote communities that need them most.
5. Consider and address in the current HESA study (and any future relevant studies), the country's health workforce associated with the delivery of health services in the private sector, including any policy, planning or capacity-building priorities that may emerge as a result. In the case of oral health/dental care, most people in Canada (with private insurance or ability to pay) receive care from oral health professionals in private offices, whereas more vulnerable populations rely more on publicly funded options to access oral health care in their provinces/territories (depending on eligibility criteria).

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