



THE CANADIAN DENTAL
HYGIENISTS ASSOCIATION
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE
DES HYGIÉNISTES DENTAIREs

Findings from CDHA's Stakeholder Polling on Priorities

Future Dental Hygiene Research

AUGUST 2022

About the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association

The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) is the collective national voice of Canada's dental hygienists (over 30,000), directly representing over 20,000 members. Since 1963, CDHA has supported its members in providing quality preventive and therapeutic oral health care as well as health promotion for the Canadian public. CDHA builds on the strength, passion, and dedication of its members to advance the profession through advocacy initiatives, public awareness campaigns, research, education, and professional development.

About these findings

This report summarizes findings from a stakeholder poll conducted in fall 2021 to inform updates to CDHA's Dental Hygiene Research Agenda.

For more information

Visit CDHA online at cdha.ca/research or contact Juliana Jackson, manager of policy, research, and government relations at jjackson@cdha.ca.

Background

In fall 2021, CDHA invited its research stakeholders to participate in a poll on priorities for future **dental hygiene research** in Canada. The poll was distributed widely to dental hygienists and other professionals working in research, oral health care, and related clinical and academic settings to solicit the views of both the oral health and health research communities.

These findings were used to inform recent updates to CDHA's Dental Hygiene Research Agenda (hereinafter referred to as "the research agenda"). CDHA also intends to poll its general membership on future research priorities in advance of a full revision of the research agenda in 2025. A large majority of CDHA's 20,000+ members practise dental hygiene in traditional dental offices, with smaller segments working in community settings, public health, and independent dental hygiene clinics. It is useful and important to consider insights from those with different relationships to dental hygiene research.

The polling of research stakeholders took place between November 1 and 12, 2021. This report summarizes the data collected from the 86 respondents. It does not offer an interpretation of the findings.

Respondent characteristics

The poll began with a series of demographic questions for CDHA's dental hygiene research stakeholders.

Professional designation

Of the 86 respondents who answered the question "Which of the following best describes your current professional designation?"

- 76% were dental hygienists
- 13% held other professional designations
- 9% were dental hygiene students
- 1% were dentists
- 1% were other oral health care workers (see below)

Some respondents who identified themselves as either “other” oral health care workers or as holding “other” professional designations specified that they were academics (i.e., professors, instructors, coordinators), periodontists, policy professionals or retired.

Work setting

Respondents identified their primary work setting as follows:

- 42% education
- 21% clinical practice
- 14% other
- 8% research
- 7% public health
- 2% professional or sector association
- 2% non-profit
- 2% no response
- 1% government

Some respondents specified their “other” work settings as administration or community service. Others explained that they were students, consultants or retired.

Jurisdiction

The jurisdictions that the primary work setting of the 86 respondents serve are as follows:

- 31% Alberta
- 22% Ontario
- 16% British Columbia
- 8% Canada
- 5% Manitoba
- 5% United States
- 3% Nova Scotia
- 3% international (excluding United States)
- 2% Quebec
- 2% New Brunswick
- 1% North America

Relationship to dental hygiene research

The 86 respondents described their primary role in/relationship to dental hygiene research as follows:

- 31% knowledge users
- 30% research investigators
- 10% health policy/program staff
- 9% dental hygiene students
- 7% no response
- 6% other (see below)
- 5% thesis-based graduate students
- 1% research funders

Some respondents specified their "other" roles or relationships to dental hygiene research as data collection, teaching research, participating in research, and supporting research.

Awareness of CDHA's 2015-2021 Dental Hygiene Research Agenda

CDHA's 2015-2021 Dental Hygiene Research Agenda aims to effect change in three key areas:

- access to care and unmet oral health needs of individuals
- risk assessment and management of health conditions
- capacity building within the dental hygiene profession

Of the 85 respondents who answered the question "Before receiving this poll, were you aware of CDHA's existing Dental Hygiene Research Agenda?"

- 64% said yes

Priorities for future dental hygiene research

Sixty-seven respondents (78%) answered the poll's main question about the strategic priorities for Canadian dental hygiene research in the next three years. Several key themes emerged from their responses. This question was not answered by 19 respondents (22%). While some of the themes and topics highlighted below were already reflected to varying degrees in the research agenda, respondents offered fresh perspectives on the issues based on changes to the health care landscape in the intervening years. (e.g., oral health delivery, oral health and health research, health system, public policy environment).

Key themes

Access to care and unmet oral health needs

Many respondents expressed the need to continue focusing on access to care. As one respondent stated, "Still believe that access to care is critical along with risk assessments and providing credible information." Specifically, respondents highlighted access to dental hygiene care for vulnerable and underserved populations, as well as for marginalized groups. Many respondents wanted to see further research on eliminating gaps, reducing barriers, and health equity. Other respondents also discussed research on access to oral health/dental hygiene care in terms of data collection, reporting, and trends. Examining how social determinants might be improved to reduce oral health disparities for the most vulnerable was also considered.

Aging population

Respondents stressed the importance of research on seniors' oral health, particularly in the areas of access to care, oral-systemic linkages, and, as one respondent stated, "how dental hygiene can support, influence and ensure optimal care for the older client as our population ages in place, and retains teeth for their lifetime."

When it comes to dental hygiene services in long-term care (LTC) homes, respondents suggested that research focus on staffing models with full-time dental hygienists as members of the LTC workforce, quality of oral health care, and oral health status in LTC homes. Some respondents referred to assisted living centres as examples of different types of congregate living settings where dental hygiene care is provided.

Diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion were recurring themes in multiple contexts such as caring for clients, demographics in the dental hygiene profession, and education (at both the student body and faculty levels).

With respect to client care, respondents recognized the need for research on how to deliver oral health care and education with cultural, racial, and gender sensitivity. One respondent highlighted culturally sensitive dental hygiene care for transgendered people, calling for research on appropriate language and the oral health implications of hormonal pharmaceuticals. Another respondent proposed a stronger research focus on clients with physical or cognitive disabilities, as well as those diagnosed with cancer, for example, alongside the more common emphasis on aging clients.

With respect to teaching and learning, one respondent commented on the need to support community-based dental hygiene research, particularly studies driven by Indigenous leaders.

Pandemic and post-pandemic

It was no surprise to see the COVID-19 pandemic reflected in many of the responses, even as it potentially shifts to an endemic state in Canada. Respondents highlighted the public's post-pandemic awareness of the dental hygiene profession, infection control in dental and dental hygiene offices, vaccination requirements, and the pandemic's toll on the health care system and health human resources as worthy areas of exploration.

Workforce health and wellness

Respondents also identified health and wellness research topics such as burnout, mental health, and ergonomics, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of new regulations and standards of practice.

Health economics

Respondents observed that an economics approach to dental hygiene care was "undeveloped yet essential" for policy planning and program funding. They proposed that future research address the cost-benefit and cost-efficiency of dental hygiene-based oral health programs as well as the cost effectiveness of different models of dental hygiene care delivery.

Interprofessional collaboration and interdisciplinary care

Many respondents called for a continued emphasis on interprofessional collaboration and interdisciplinary care. These concepts were considered from several perspectives including learning/education, the conduct of research itself, the delivery of care in non-traditional settings, partnerships with other regulated health professionals, and career satisfaction.

As one respondent explained, "Focusing on research that is multidisciplinary will help bolster the dental hygienist identity that we are more than mere 'tooth cleaners'."

And, as another remarked, "The pandemic has highlighted the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to health care and how dental hygienists are equipped to contribute to alternate practice settings."

Respondents also revealed an ongoing dynamic among oral health providers, sharing that "Dental hygiene and dentistry still appear to be operating as silos with limited consideration of a holistic approach to client care, and the ideal of interprofessional collaboration still appears to be largely theoretical. Perhaps research into why this is so, as well as ways to improve collaborative efforts, could reduce disparities and help overall client care, health and wellbeing."

Dental hygiene education

Curriculum development and innovations in education delivery were noted in several responses. Research on the potential of online teaching methods, given the rise of online learning during the pandemic, was also raised. In addition, respondents expressed the need to look at how dental hygiene education is delivered across the country to ensure that dental hygiene credentials are at the appropriate level for future practice.

Capacity-building of the profession

Respondents described capacity building as a significant priority for future research. They recognized that dental hygienists have an important role to play in meeting unmet needs and reducing barriers to care through independent practice, expanded scopes of practice (and safety thereof), expanded roles (dental therapists, for example), and knowledge translation. Respondents also pointed to a research focus on what educators can include in curricula so that students graduate with experience in conducting research.

Oral-systemic links

Many respondents expressed a need for “deeper” research into links between oral health and systemic disease, with a focus on identifying new associations. Extreme dietary changes and diabetes were some specific examples identified.

Keywords and topics

The following topics were proposed by respondents. Some may be straightforward for readers, and some may overlap.

- Clenching/stress related to bone loss
- Sleep health
- Familial violence
- Vaping and cannabis
- Teledentistry and related technologies
- Dental hygiene driven science (i.e., chemistry, microbiology, engineering). As one respondent stated, “We are not generating DH researchers who delve into DH problems. We should be working on the best toothpastes, the best oral rinses, oral cancer and viral diseases, technology for best use in prevention and diagnostics, etc.”
- Instructional devices
- Client education (e.g., dental disease prevention, effective instruction)
- Oral health needs in underserved communities/populations
- Periodontal disease (e.g., charting and oral health instruction, risk factors, maintenance protocols, client role and motivations in prevention and management)
- Dental hygienists as primary health providers
- Dental hygienists as essential health care providers (e.g., recognition by government and in legislation)
- Public awareness and education about the dental hygiene profession
- Prevention (e.g., decay, tooth loss, gum disease, xylitol rather than fluoride, sugar-free snacks)
- Administration of local anesthetic
- Prescription of radiographs
- Point-of care risk assessments
- Practice standards (e.g., disparities across Canada)
- Evidence-based practice in dental offices (e.g., use of fluoride rinses, polish)
- Universal health care
- Climate change and its impact on dental hygiene practice

Next steps

CDHA thanks the respondents who participated in this short poll, sharing their views and opinions on the most important directions for future dental hygiene research in Canada. These findings were used to update CDHA's 2015-2021 Dental Hygiene Research Agenda and will be one of several critical inputs that CDHA and its Research Advisory Committee will draw on when the research agenda undergoes a full revision in 2025.

Dental hygiene-specific research adds to the overall body of oral health knowledge, allowing the profession to meet the evolving and complex needs of the public and enhance the oral health and well-being of all persons living in Canada.

The updated version of CDHA's Dental Hygiene Research Agenda is now available at cdha.ca/research.