

Long-term care changes must support greater resident access to oral health services

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every Canadian, but has had a particular effect on seniors living in long-term care facilities. The Canadian Institute for Health Information reports these homes have seen nearly one-fifth of all confirmed cases, and have been associated with 80 per cent of all COVID-19 deaths in Canada. The pandemic has made it abundantly clear that Canada for too long has ignored senior's care. In response, the Minister of Health has been charged with creating new national standards to improve support for seniors.

As governments across Canada begin to revisit policies on seniors, one of the areas that needs particular attention includes oral hygiene, which is directly linked to overall health. Thanks to healthier lifestyles and advances in professional care, Canadians “can expect to keep most, if not all of our natural teeth as we enter our senior years,” according to Dental Hygiene Canada—” but keeping those teeth healthy can be a challenge.” Many seniors, especially those who rely on others for care, have poor oral hygiene and high rates of oral disease. Oral diseases can cause pain, discomfort, difficulties chewing and swallowing, and are also associated with heart and lung diseases, diabetes, and stroke.

Oral health outcomes have been an ongoing concern for seniors and long-term care residents in particular, and are an example of systemic problems with health care accessibility for aging Canadians. It would come as a shock to most, that people living in long-term care settings do not always have access to daily mouth care. They also have irregular access to professional dental hygiene care. At present there are no national guidelines for oral care in long-term care settings in Canada.

In addition, seniors in Canada are far less likely to have access to private health insurance to cover the services of a dental hygienist or dentist. This limited access puts them at greater risk of poor oral health, which has significant individual and societal consequences. For example, living with gum disease can increase susceptibility to aspiration pneumonia, the leading cause of death from infections in older adults.

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Better access to professional care, coupled with good daily oral hygiene habits, would help limit more serious conditions that arise, like abscesses, infections, and even some oral cancers. This would substantially reduce pressures on the acute care system when hospitalization occurs for easily preventable oral health conditions.

As the federal government begins to set standards for long-term care, it must consider developing national oral healthcare standards for seniors living in long-term care facilities to ensure access to a broader spectrum of health services, including oral care for seniors. As we rebuild from the pandemic, seniors care must be front and centre in the minds of policymakers. We cannot continue ignoring this issue, as our seniors deserve the same serv

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Ondina Love is the CEO of the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association.

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