

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming 2022 Federal Budget

By: The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association

The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association is the collective, national voice of more than 29,000 dental hygienists in Canada, directly representing 20,000 individual members.

Dental hygiene represents the sixth largest regulated health profession in the country.

August 2021

List of Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** That the federal government accelerate action for national oral health funding to ensure Canadians have access to oral health care. CDHA recommends a phased-in approach starting with seniors who don't currently have dental coverage and low-income Canadians.
- **Recommendation 2:** That the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces, territories and oral health system experts, ensure the inclusion of oral health in the development of national standards for Canada's long-term care homes.
- **Recommendation 3:** That the federal government expand the eligibility of the existing Canada Student Loan forgiveness program/benefit to dental hygienists who work in rural or remote communities.

Note: references, studies and peer-reviewed sources omitted for length, available upon request.

Context

The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) believes that the key to a prosperous Canada lies in the health of its people. Our recommendations reflect our belief that oral health is fundamental to overall health.

As the Canadian economy recovers, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the oral and overall health of Canadians must be given greater recognition and consideration. Oral health in public health and public policies must be addressed by all levels of government

What is Oral Health?

Oral health is an integral part of overall health and well-being.

CDHA defines oral health as “the state of the mouth and associated structures being free from disease and, where future disease is inhibited, maintaining functions such as eating, talking, and smiling, contributing to overall health, well-being and quality of life.”

The public health burden of oral diseases – global snapshot

- Oral diseases pose a major health burden for many countries and affect people throughout their lifetime, causing pain, discomfort, disfigurement and even death.
- In July 2019, *The Lancet* focused on oral health, and observed that oral diseases, including tooth decay, gum disease, and oral cancers, affect almost half of the global population, with untreated dental decay the most common health condition worldwide.
- Treatment for oral health conditions is expensive and is usually not part of universal health coverage. In most high-income countries, dental treatment averages 5% of total health expenditure and 20% of out-of-pocket health expenditure.
- Most oral health conditions are largely preventable and can be treated in their early stages.
- In May 2021, the World Health Organization approved a historic resolution on oral health urging member countries to address the key risk factors of oral diseases, to shift from a curative approach to a preventive approach to oral health, making a clear statement that oral health care should be included in universal health coverage programs.

The public health burden of oral diseases – Canadian snapshot

- Like many other countries around the world, Canada faces challenges providing the most vulnerable segments of its population with the oral health services they require.
- In Canada, an estimated 2.26 million schooldays are missed each year due to dental-related illness and tooth decay accounts for one-third of all day surgeries performed on children between the ages of 1 and 5.

- The use of dental care services is largely influenced by insurance coverage and the ability to pay out of pocket for the expenses. Pre-pandemic, 22.4% of Canadians avoided visiting a dental professional due to cost.

Recommendation 1: That the federal government accelerate action for national oral health funding to ensure Canadians have access to oral health care. CDHA recommends a phased-in approach starting with seniors who don't currently have dental coverage and low-income Canadians.

Prior to the pandemic, CDHA expressed its support for the federal government's identification of universal dental care in its agenda as set out in the:

- Speech from the Throne that opened the 43rd session of Parliament (December 2019);
- Expectations and priorities described in the mandate letter sent from the Prime Minister to the Minister of Health (December 13, 2019); and
- List of future studies to be undertaken by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health (February 26, 2020).

In pre-pandemic public opinion polling conducted for CDHA with over 2,000 Canadians it was found that,

- 4-in-10 Canadians do not have access to dental benefits. Those without coverage are most likely to be the elderly, have a lower income, live in a rural area, or live in Atlantic Canada or Quebec.
- 56% of Canadians over age 60 have no dental benefits.
- More than 1-in-5 Canadians have not accessed professional oral care in over two years.

The devastating impact of COVID-19 on Canada's system of care illustrates the importance of having a strong, accessible public health care system to protect our communities. The pandemic has also had the effect of unveiling many structural inequities in Canada's health care system. Many of the broader issues relating to the burden of oral diseases and access to oral health for vulnerable groups that existed across the country prior to the onset of COVID-19, have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

This is especially true for low-income Canadians and seniors.

As primary health care providers, dental hygienists are experts in oral health promotion and disease prevention and recognize that good oral health is vital for overall health. Dental hygienists are doing their part to continue to improve the oral health of Canadians through the delivery of oral health services, education, and health promotion.

However, millions of Canadians do not have access to professional oral care, which has an impact on overall health. Oral care continues to be funded largely from workplace benefits, private insurance, or out of pocket by Canadians who have the means.

We encourage the federal government to accelerate action for the delivery of dedicated funding for national oral health care to ensure low-income Canadians and seniors without dental coverage, can have access to preventive oral health care. This is also important for addressing the burden of oral diseases in Canada. CDHA and dental hygienists stand ready to support efforts to ensure that those who need help the most are supported.

Recommendation 2: That the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces, territories and oral health system experts, ensure the inclusion of oral health in the development of national standards for Canada’s long-term care homes.

CDHA welcomes the federal government’s commitment to strengthening long-term care services in ensuring national standards are developed and implemented. When it comes to national standards for providing safe, reliable, and high-quality care in long-term care homes across our country, meeting the oral health care needs of residents must be addressed.

We also commend the work being led by the Health Standards Organization on national long-term care services standard that will focus on resident- and family-centred care practices that value the importance of respect, dignity, trust, and quality of life; safe and reliable care based on evidence-informed practices; and a healthy and competent workforce to ensure sustainable, team-based, compassionate care. Oral health must be included in this important initiative.

CDHA urges government to ensure that the development of national standards includes oral health components to safeguard people living in long-term care. It’s time to overcome longstanding challenges and barriers for residents of long-term care homes across Canada to access daily oral health care and regular professional preventive oral health services.

Many older adults, especially those who rely on others for care, have poor oral hygiene and high rates of untreated oral disease. The most common oral conditions among older people are tooth loss, dental caries, periodontitis (gum disease), dry mouth, and oral precancer/cancer. Poor oral health can adversely affect quality of life and contribute to other health complications due to chronic inflammation.

We recommend that the federal government provide new targeted funding to help provinces and territories implement standards for long-term care services, which must include a focus on oral care for every resident (among other aspects). In addition, funding should be tied to oversight and accountability systems to ensure delivery of those standards of care by qualified professionals.

Recommendation 3: That the federal government expand the eligibility of the existing Canada Student Loan forgiveness program/benefit to dental hygienists who work in rural or remote communities.

CDHA recommends that the federal government forgive a portion of student loans for registered dental hygienists who practice in rural and remote communities. The same program has been made available to doctors and nurses for many years and would generate increased incentive for dental hygienists to provide preventive oral health care in those places. Further, knowledge of loan forgiveness opportunities could incentivize people living in rural and remote communities to pursue dental hygiene education with the knowledge that they would be able to return to work in their home community with a financial advantage.

There are also other incentives to consider, such as scholarships for students from rural and remote communities who choose to study dental hygiene, with a commitment that they will return to those communities to provide services upon graduation. Wage incentives or tax credits for practicing in underserved communities are additional considerations.

As a health workforce initiative to incentivize care for underserved populations and bring care to populations rather than populations to care, this recommendation promotes the consideration and recognition of regulated health care services that are distinct from medicine and nursing through the loan forgiveness component of the Canada Student Loans Program.

Ensuring rural and remote communities have strong oral health services will ensure the overall health of residents and help decrease the prevalence and burden of the oral disease. Access to these and other extended health care services in rural and remote communities remains an ongoing challenge for many Canadians.

More than 6 million Canadians live in rural areas (approximately 20% of the population). Canadians living in small, northern, and geographically isolated communities do not have equitable access to the full range of oral health services enjoyed by individuals living in urban centres. Geographic, coupled with workforce constraints, perpetuate these issues and make oral health care delivery particularly challenging.

Extending the eligibility of the Canada Student Loan forgiveness program/benefit to include dental hygienists has the potential to increase access to more oral health services for Canadians living in underserved rural and remote communities.