

Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance

2024 Pre-Budget Consultations

**Canadian Dental Hygienists Association
July 2023**

List of Recommendations

The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association recommends that the Government of Canada take the following immediate steps:

- **Recommendation 1:** That ongoing investments in the new Canada Dental Care Plan reflect preventive oral health services to support improved outcomes for millions of uninsured Canadians.
- **Recommendation 2:** That the federal government provide new targeted funding to help provinces and territories implement standards for long-term care services, which includes a focus on oral health care for every resident supported by staffing with qualified oral health professionals. Funding should be tied to oversight and accountability systems to enforce those standards of care.
- **Recommendation 3:** That to support the new Canada Dental Care Plan, the federal government accelerate its plan to expand its current list of eligible professionals under its Student Loan Forgiveness benefit, by including dental hygienists to ensure increased access to oral health services in rural and remote communities.

Context

Canada's dental hygienists understand the connection between oral health and overall health throughout the lifespan.

Prevention is key to good oral health.

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.”

Dental hygienists see the first-hand impacts of poor oral health when early and regular preventive care is neglected or non-existent. That's why the profession has long called for expanded access to preventive oral care services for people in Canada.

Quick facts about Canada's dental hygienists

- Dental hygienists 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 people in Canada.
- Dental hygienists can practise without the supervision of a dentist in all provinces. Many have established their own independent dental hygiene businesses to improve access to care, especially for vulnerable populations. If a dental hygienist practising independently identifies a health or dental concern, they will refer their patients/clients to the appropriate healthcare professional for further care.
- Dental hygienists are graduates of one of 35 accredited programs offered in colleges and universities across Canada, with education in the areas of anatomy and physiology, microbiology and infection control, pharmacology, health promotion and disease prevention, and nutrition and health.
- Dental hygienists form the sixth largest regulated health profession in Canada with more than 31,000 practitioners.

CDHA's Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That ongoing investments in the new Canada Dental Care Plan reflect preventive oral health services to support improved outcomes for millions of uninsured Canadians.

CDHA is very pleased to see the new investments the federal government is making to ensure access to oral health care for millions of uninsured Canadians (Canada Dental Benefit, Canadian Dental Care Plan (CDCP), Oral Health Access Fund, Better Dental Care Data).

While these substantial investments are welcomed and needed, we know that doing so without a significant focus and commitment to prevention will fail to achieve the ultimate goals of contributing to the improved oral health of millions of Canadians.

Thinking of the health system and societal impacts tied to untreated and late-treated oral conditions and diseases underscores the importance of transforming healthcare by **shifting the paradigm from treatment to prevention**. Consider the following indicators that are often discussed in our Canadian context:

- People who avoid visiting a dental professional due to cost.
- Avoidable hospital emergency room visits for oral/dental problems and pain.
- Hospital surgeries for early childhood caries.
- Time away from school and work due to mouth pain.
- People with untreated decayed teeth, gum disease, and other mouth conditions.
- People diagnosed with oral cancer including cancers of the head and neck area.
- People with self-reported pain anywhere in their mouth due to problems with their oral health or oral appliances.

In anticipation of the initial roll out of the CDCP by the end of this year, with full implementation by 2025, CDHA believes that an immediate and ongoing emphasis on prevention will sustain the best outcomes for the beneficiary population including:

- Maintaining and enhancing good oral health.
- Monitoring, detecting, and treating minor conditions or diseases early before becoming major issues that may be painful, difficult, and costly to treat in traditional clinics, surgical rooms, and hospital emergency departments.

CDHA recommends that coverage under the CDCP for the eligible population of up to nine million Canadians supports a proactive approach that includes the prevention and/or reduction of oral conditions and diseases through the following **dental hygienist services**:

- Examinations (medical history, assessment of oral cavity, teeth, and soft tissues; risk assessments for oral conditions/diseases).
- Removal of dental plaque and tartar from teeth, gums, and oral appliances.
- Therapies to restore gum health or prevent gum diseases.
- Application of dental sealants to prevent the formation of decay on tooth chewing surfaces.

- Topical applications of fluoride therapies to prevent or treat tooth decay, enamel erosion, and dental sensitivity.
- Temporary fillings to restore a damaged tooth before a permanent solution is placed.
- Personalized oral hygiene education to prevent or reduce the burden of disease and instill good daily habits.
- Targeted health promotion strategies including counseling in nutrition and tobacco cessation.

Getting this plan right for the Canadians who need it the most among children, people living with disabilities, seniors, and low-income households means that the **amount of coverage within the terms of the plan is just as important as the types of services the plan provides**. Recognizing there are many policy and fiscal considerations in the coverage of routine and preventive care and disease treatment, we believe a person's pre-existing oral status/conditions and unmet dental care needs are of utmost importance in this regard.

CDHA and dental hygienists across the country are optimistic about the transformative potential of the introduction of the CDCP.

As Health Canada advances its work on the delivery of the plan, CDHA also emphasizes:

- **Awareness campaigns to support providers' participation and the eligible population's enrollment in the plan.** CDHA stands ready to support this through our ongoing communications to members (over 20,000), coordination with our provincial counterparts, and our dedicated website for the public.
- **Accessible and convenient delivery of care settings allowed under the plan** (such as mobile clinics, schools, community centres, long-term care homes, at home) to support the population's utilization and positive experiences with the plan. A growing number of dental hygienists offer comprehensive care and services outside traditional dental clinics to support those with limited mobility, difficulties taking time off work, dental office phobias, and more.

Recommendation 2: That the federal government provide new targeted funding to help provinces and territories implement standards for long-term care services, which includes a focus on oral health care for every resident supported by staffing with qualified oral health professionals. Funding should be tied to oversight and accountability systems to enforce those standards of care.

As work moves forward with the introduction of the new Canada Dental Care Plan by end of 2023, which includes seniors as a subset of the target population, CDHA highlights the urgency of also responding to the unmet oral health needs of people living in long-term care (LTC) homes with additional federal strategies and investments.

It's time to overcome longstanding challenges and barriers associated with access to oral health services in LTC homes. The absence of comprehensive oral health assessments and daily mouth care in Canada's LTC system has long been identified, leaving many LTC residents without the oral health care they need.

Examples of barriers in long-term care include:

- Residents who struggle with oral self-care due to pain, physical limitations, prevalence of dementia or cognitive impairments.
- LTC homes with insufficient staffing capacity for the delivery of routine oral hygiene/health services, including the timely detection of oral/dental problems.
- Residents' (or their families') inability to pay for services from a dental hygienist or dentist (out-of-pocket or insurance).

CDHA acknowledges that this year's release of the new national LTC service standard by the Health Standards Organization and its reflection of oral health (in relation to needs assessments, individual care plans, risks of oral conditions, procedures, and referrals to appropriate health care professionals) is a good starting point.

At the same time, many residents are still unable to access professional oral health care services (e.g., from dental hygienists) because they cannot afford to pay out-of-pocket for additional health care services to fully meet their care needs.

With high-quality and safe care for all LTC residents in mind, **CDHA also points to the skill mix and composition of care teams inside LTC homes**, specifically that:

- **Team-based care in LTC homes includes dental hygienists working to their full scope of practice to support a comprehensive program of oral health services** (including oral health assessments, personalized oral health care plans, daily mouth care) to meet the assessed oral health needs of residents.
- **All direct-care workers in LTC homes receive education on oral health. This education is developed and delivered by dental hygienists.**

While we recognize that LTC falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, CDHA recommends that the federal government provide new targeted funding to help provinces

and territories implement standards for long-term care services, which includes a focus on oral health care for every resident.

Recommendation 3: That to support the new Canada Dental Care Plan, the federal government accelerate its plan to expand its current list of eligible professionals under its Student Loan Forgiveness benefit, by including dental hygienists to ensure increased access to oral health services in rural and remote communities.

To support access to oral health care in rural and remote communities across the country, CDHA calls on government to accelerate its plan to expand its current list of eligible professionals under its Student Loan Forgiveness Program (as outlined in the [mandate letter](#) for the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion and in [Budget 2022](#)).

A considered government plan that is moving forward with a transformative investment to provide dental care for millions of uninsured Canadians (Canada Dental Benefit, Canadian Dental Care Plan, Oral Health Access Fund, Better Dental Care Data), should extend the list of eligible professions for the Canada Student Loan Forgiveness Program to include dental hygienists and other dental professions.

If expanded to dental hygiene professionals, the Canada Dental Care Plan and the Canada Student Loan Forgiveness benefit would contribute to an effective whole-of-government approach among federal departments and agencies that actively improves access to oral health care services across Canada.

This would also support ongoing efforts to address the workforce crisis in Canada's health care system. The lack of supply of health professionals in rural and remote regions has been widely recognized and continues to represent a pressing issue.

The recent report of the Standing Committee on Health ([Addressing Canada's Health Workforce Crisis](#)) discussed the importance of **incentives and supports to increase recruitment and retention within the health workforce generally, and to address the rural and remote health workforce specifically**. We also point to Coalition for Action for Health Workers that was established by Health Canada to provide advice on immediate and longer-term solutions to address significant health workforce challenges, so that all Canadians can access the quality care they need and deserve.

The reality is that it will take the collective efforts of government that are grounded in a strategic approach and complemented by health system partners and other stakeholders to address the long-standing challenges of the health system in this country.

Associated Canadian Public Opinion Poll

1 in 4 Canadians report their access to dental care services changed in the pandemic and remains different today. Read more in results [released by CDHA](#) (conducted January 2023).