



## Opinion



Minister of Health Jean-Yves Duclos, pictured in June 2023. Pervasive inequities and barriers in Canada's health-care system often prevent people from receiving the care they require, but through the Canada Dental Care Plan, the opportunity exists for some of those inequities to be addressed. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

# The Canadian Dental Care Plan must prioritize prevention and accessibility

Dental hygienists are poised and ready to fill the gaps that currently exist in oral health-care services across the country.

BY ANNE CAISSIE

Everyone deserves timely access to high-quality oral health care.

But pervasive inequities and barriers in Canada's health-care system often prevent people from receiving the care they require. Vulnerable and marginalized communities—like low-income families, Indigenous peoples, new immigrants, children with special health needs, people living with disabilities, and seniors—are particularly disadvantaged. Not only are these populations more likely to experience challenges accessing oral health care, but they are also more likely to experience higher levels of oral disease.

If not treated adequately, appropriately, and proactively, oral health concerns can quickly become larger problems with severe consequences for one's overall health and well-being. A lack of access to critical, preventive oral care places vulnerable and marginalized communities in Canada at unnecessary and unjustified risk for additional health complications and illnesses.

Simply put, failing to receive timely, high-quality oral health care may put your life at risk.

So, whether it be a routine check-up or an emergency appointment, there's no time to waste when it comes to making sure that oral health care is immediately accessible, equitable, and culturally sensitive.

Dental hygienists are poised and ready to fill the gaps that currently exist in oral health-care services across the country. As primary health-care professionals, dental hygienists can practice without the supervision of a dentist in all provinces, and many have already established their own independent dental hygiene businesses, allowing for more people to receive care, particularly in rural and remote communities. Dental hygienists are in a prime position to facilitate greater and more equitable access to dental care for vulnerable populations and marginalized communities across the country.

But they can't do it alone.

It is imperative that the Canadian Dental Care Plan, set to be released by the end of this year, includes comprehensive coverage for Canada's vulnerable and marginalized communities. In order to ensure that oral health care is actually made available to more people in a wider variety of settings, the plan must take into account the many factors that detrimentally impact an individual's ability to receive care, such as income, geographic location, or mobility. The barriers that prevent an individual from accessing oral health care have been identified time and time again. Now, they must be addressed.

A Canadian Dental Care Plan that is truly equitable and inclusive must reflect the diverse needs of Canadians

across the country. In doing so, the plan has the transformative potential to facilitate greater patient access to dental hygienists and other primary health-care professionals, ensuring that anyone seeking care—regardless of location, income, background, or ability—is able to receive it, when and where they need it.

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