

Dental hygienists have powerful potential to improve oral health care delivery in Canada

Ottawa can better support the oral health care of long-term care residents by implementing national standards and team-based care that includes dental hygienists.

April is Oral Health Month. As the Canadian Dental Care Plan continues to roll out, now is a great time to reflect on the ways in which taking care of our oral health has a positive impact on all aspects of our lives, particularly for seniors, children, and other vulnerable populations.

An important part of the celebration of Oral Health Month is National Dental Hygienists Week™ which runs from April 4-10 and is sponsored by the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA). Dental hygienists are integral members of oral health teams working to prevent, treat, monitor, and address oral health issues across Canada. Dental hygiene is the sixth largest registered health profession in Canada, with more than 31,000 registered dental hygienists working in a variety of settings, with people of all ages, addressing oral health issues.

This year's theme for National Dental Hygienists Week™ is Oral Health for Total Health. We know that there is a direct link between oral health and overall health and well-being. Oral and gum issues can lead to other serious illnesses including respiratory disease, diabetes, and heart disease. Fortunately, most oral health issues are easily preventable and treatable. Canadians can be greatly assisted through prevention, early detection, and intervention.

That's where the work of dedicated oral health care professionals comes in.

As essential primary healthcare providers, dental hygienists play a vital role in the delivery of oral health services, education, and health promotion. Dental hygienists are one of the eligible oral health providers under the Canadian Dental Care Plan and work alongside dentists, denturists, and dental specialists to provide timely, high-quality oral health services. Dental hygienists aren't just based in traditional dental offices — a growing number

deliver services in independently-owned dental hygiene clinics, mobile practices, schools, private homes, and LTC homes. The varied settings where they practise ensure Canadians can access the dental care they need, where and when they need it.

Easy access to professional oral health care is particularly important for preventing oral health diseases and improving the health and well-being of older adults and seniors. This is especially true for those living in long-term care (LTC) homes. In the wake of the pandemic and the recently published national LTC services standard, it is critical to ensure that services for seniors and those in LTC homes are adapted to meet their increasingly complex healthcare needs and support their overall well-being. The dignity of seniors and LTC residents is top-of-mind for dental hygienists, who see first-hand the oral health-related concerns and illnesses that others may not recognize.

The federal government can better support the oral health care needs of residents in LTC homes by investing in the implementation of the national LTC services standards and the integration of team-based care that includes dental hygienists working to their full scope of practice to expand the overall quality of care. For non-oral health care professionals who work with residents, this means oral health education and training to improve delivery of direct care. For LTC residents, this means access to improved oral health services including oral health assessments, personalized oral health care plans, daily mouth care, and minimally invasive treatments to preserve basic function and protect quality of life.

Dental hygienists are a crucial component of the solution to overcome longstanding challenges and barriers to oral health care in LTC homes. Working to their full scope of practice will help dental hygienists ensure that LTC residents are receiving the oral health services they need.

LTC homes are just one example of the transformative potential of dental hygienists to improve oral health care delivery in Canada. Dental hygienists play a key role in designing, evaluating, and implementing oral health care strategies that support the health and well-being of all Canadians: Canadians deserve a high standard of care no matter where they live.

Every day, dental hygienists work hard to ensure the delivery of quality, affordable, accessible, and essential oral health services in communities across

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Canada. This National Dental Hygienists Week™, and every week, we celebrate the many valuable contributions of dental hygienists to healthcare delivery in Canada and commit to supporting them as they support Canadians and Canadian residents. There is no health without oral health.



Francine Trudeau is the President of the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA). Over her 39-year career in dental hygiene, she has worked in private practice, dental public health, education, and program administration. Francine holds a Diploma in Dental Hygiene from CEGEP John Abbott College, a Bachelor of Science from Université de Montréal, and a Master of Education from Université de Sherbrooke.