



Shaping Public Opinion of the Profession

In the spring 2020 issue of *Oh Canada!* we gave you a sneak peek at the results of the public opinion survey we launched last January. We contracted Abacus Data to conduct a reputation benchmark study of 2,000 Canadians, examining the perceptions and gaps in public knowledge of the dental hygiene profession. Now we'd like to take a deeper dive into the results and discuss where we go from here. CDHA members can [view the full report](#) online.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

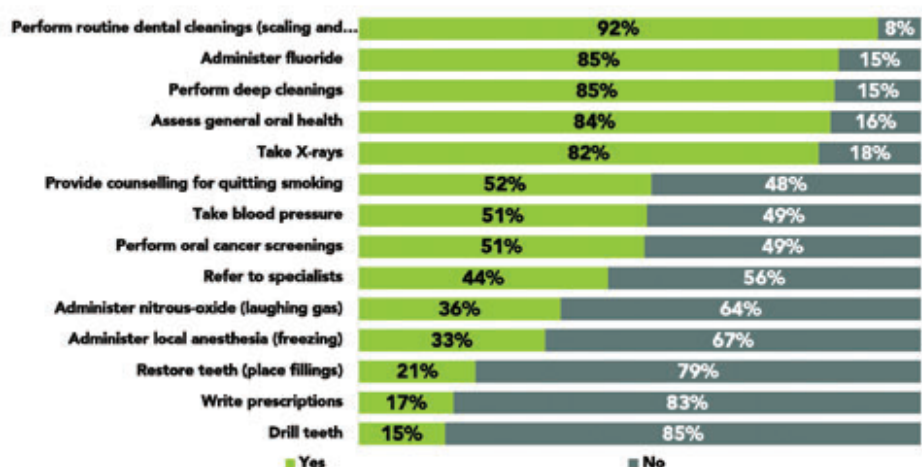
First and foremost, the report's executive summary states that dental hygienists enjoy a positive reputation among Canadians: 89% of the population has a very positive (34%) or mostly positive (55%) view of the profession. This is the same top tier ranking as dentists and it positions dental hygienists among the top five of all health professionals (together with paramedics, nurses, doctors, and pharmacists).

The survey gathered data on the level of trust the public places in dental hygienists, their perception of how essential dental hygiene services are, and how essential the dental hygienist's role is in health care. In addition, survey questions probed the level of public awareness of the duties/scope of practice and education of dental hygienists. The survey also sought information on the respondents' access to dental benefits, frequency of dental care, reasons for dental visits, and level of comfort with independent practice visits.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

- 29% of respondents see dental hygienists as "essential" within the health care system.
- 82% to 92% of Canadians are accurately knowledgeable about the routine services that fall under our scope of practice, with high levels of

DENTAL HYGIENIST DUTIES



Most Canadians are aware tasks performed at a standard, routine check-up can be performed by dental hygienists.

Canadians are less certain about tasks that involve other healthcare professionals, and prep work for more major dental procedures.

And nearly 80% or more think tasks more invasive than a regular check-up are not the responsibility of hygienists.

The following is a list of duties that a dental hygienist may or may not perform. Please answer yes or no to each based on whether you believe a dental hygienist can or cannot perform these duties.



awareness that the responsibilities of a dental hygienist include performing routine preventive “cleanings” (92%), administering fluoride (85%), performing deep cleanings (85%), assessing general oral health (84%), and taking x-rays (82%). There is also a sound understanding (80% of respondents or more) that drilling, placing fillings, performing other invasive tasks, and writing prescriptions are not the responsibility of a dental hygienist.

- 91% of Canadians are aware that dental hygienists must complete postsecondary education and training before entering the profession, with 44% indicating they believe a bachelor’s degree or higher is the minimum requirement.
- 1 in 4 Canadians are comfortable with the thought of visiting an independent dental hygienist. Specifically, younger Canadians are much more likely to visit a dental hygienist who owns their own practice.
- Individuals who frequently visit an oral health professional and have the most interactions with dental hygienists support an expanded role for dental hygienists providing dental health care.
- Dental hygiene treatment is the number one reason for respondents’ last dental care visit (52%).

WHAT’S CONCERNING?

- Canadians are divided almost equally on whether dental hygienists are primary health care professionals.
- 48% of respondents believe that dental hygienists play a supporting role within the health care system compared to other professionals. There is a lack of understanding that, in almost all regions, dental hygienists are self-regulated primary health care professionals who do not require the immediate supervision of a dentist.
- 22% of respondents seek dental care less frequently than every two years and 21% have not seen an oral health professional in over two years.
- Canadians are less certain about a number of services provided by dental hygienists. 48% to 67% are not aware that dental hygienists offer smoking cessation counselling, perform oral cancer screenings, take blood pressure, refer to specialists, and, in some regions, administer nitrous oxide or local anesthesia. Although Canadians say they are comfortable having conversations with their dental hygienist about oral health, are less likely to discuss more general health issues.

- 4 in 10 Canadians do not have access to dental benefits coverage. Those without coverage are most likely to be elderly, have a lower household income or live in rural areas.
- Respondents believe that only 50% of Canadians have one or more cavities, when the actual number is closer to 90%.

**I AM A DENTAL HYGIENIST.
I EDUCATE AND EMPOWER
CANADIANS TO EMBRACE
THEIR ORAL HEALTH FOR
BETTER OVERALL HEALTH
AND WELL-BEING.**

CDHA
ACHD

THE CANADIAN DENTAL
HYGIENISTS ASSOCIATION
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE
DES HYGIÉNISTES DENTAIRES

>>>>Association in Action...cont'd



HOW IS CDHA USING THE SURVEY DATA?

1. CDHA immediately added the term “essential” to key phrases and messaging about the profession across our communications vehicles—in our media release boiler plate statement, in our television ads, and in our feature articles.
2. We have formalized our advocacy efforts around universal dental care and care for vulnerable populations (seniors and Indigenous peoples).
3. CDHA’s board of directors has approved the following policy statement which is being used to ask government officials to include registered dental hygienists as essential primary health care providers during the current, or any future, public health emergency.

Registered Dental Hygienists Are Essential Primary Health Care Professionals

Oral health is essential to overall health. It is well established that poor oral health is associated with a host of health conditions such as diabetes, aspiration pneumonia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart disease, and immune-mediated inflammatory diseases (e.g., arthritis).¹ As the prevalence of some of these chronic conditions in older adults (over 65) is very high (e.g., diabetes 26.8%, heart disease 27%), it is critical that continuous comprehensive dental hygiene care be available to the population.²

In Canada, registered dental hygienists are in a prime position, as regulated health care professionals, to prevent and treat oral diseases through evidence-informed practice, promote oral health, and foster informed decision making related to oral health by their clients. Dental caries is the most common, yet preventable, chronic disease in the world.³ Furthermore, 52% of Canadians ages 65 and older suffer from periodontal (gum) disease that, if left untreated, can lead to tooth loss and negatively impact many aspects of their health.² Therefore, dental hygienists, as primary health care professionals, play a critical role in public and population health and should be considered essential workers.

Essential dental hygiene care includes any dental care and oral health education provided to individuals, families or communities that prevents and eliminates infection and disease of the mouth and associated structures. These interventions also allow individuals to maintain functions, such as eating, talking, and smiling, and contribute to overall health and well-being, and quality of life.

For residents in long-term care, dental hygiene services and individualized daily mouth care are essential to their health and well-being as they are at much higher risk for developing infectious diseases, such as SARS-CoV-2, due to their often suppressed immune systems. Dental hygienists are integral members of interprofessional health care teams working to provide comprehensive standards of care, supporting pain-free eating, speaking, and socializing, and providing vital oral health education and training to residents, caregivers, and family members.

CDHA asks government to include registered dental hygienists as essential primary health care providers during this, or any future, public health emergency. In order for dental hygienists to provide optimal care within the scope of their practice, they require access to government supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) and primary access to vaccines alongside other essential workers. Oral health has an enormous impact on the overall health of the population. By recognizing registered dental hygienists as essential workers, government will help to ensure the health and safety of dental hygienists—primary care providers—and the public they serve.

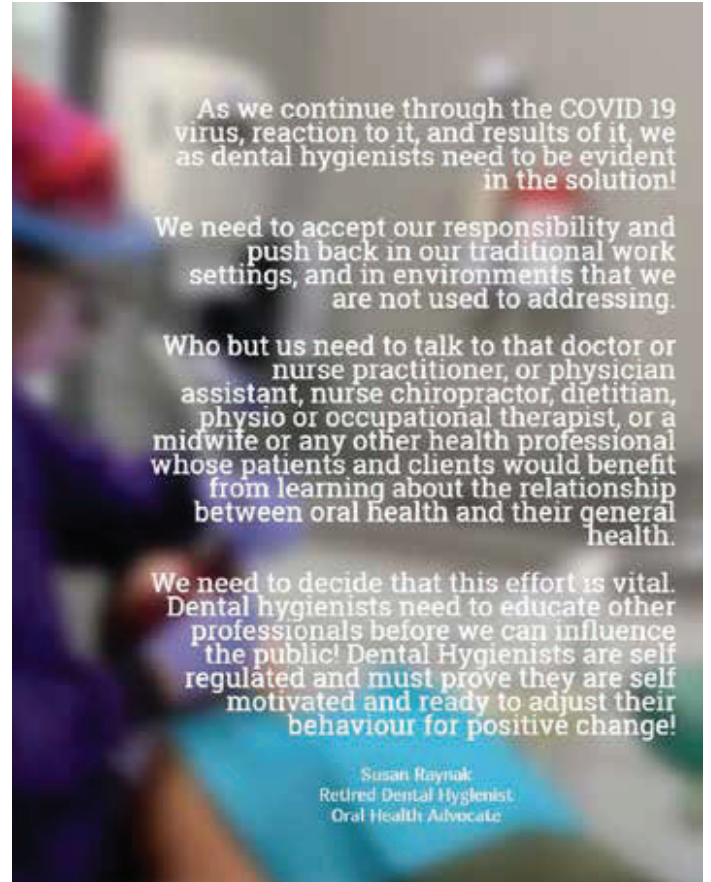
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4. A working group has been established to develop an “elevator pitch” that will address the knowledge gaps identified in the survey. It will be a quick 20-second description that dental hygienists can use to communicate the essence of the profession to others.

Everything we know points to the fact that oral health has an impact on overall health, therefore making dental hygiene services essential. The survey clearly shows that dental hygiene is in a very strong position, with a solid foundation of public trust in the role our profession plays in health care. We now have an opportunity to build on this rapport, adjusting and focussing our key messages to both the public and government to enhance the perception of dental hygienists as independent and multifaceted professionals who are essential to Canada’s health care system. The next steps start with you:

- ▶ Reflect on the call to action issued by Susanne Sunell, Sharon Compton, and Zul Kanji on page 32
- ▶ Embrace our professional identity statement
- ▶ Remind yourself of our #iamadentalhygienist mantra
- ▶ Think about the words of retired RDH and CDHA member Susan Raynak

And when our new elevator pitch statement is released for National Dental Hygienists Week™ 2021, be sure to share it far and wide: with your clients, other health care professionals, and your community at large. We must not only believe in ourselves, but also proclaim the value of our profession from the rooftops. Together we can make sure that every Canadian recognizes their dental hygienist as an essential member of their health care team.



References

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