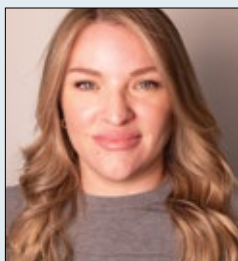




Student Scene



From Passion to Advocacy: Empowering Dental Hygiene Students as Change Makers

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My name is Emily Bissonnette, and I am a passionate dental hygiene student at the Canadian National Institute of Health in Ottawa, Ontario. My interest in preventive care was sparked when I learned that blood pressure screenings are a standard practice in dental hygiene. This resonated with me on a personal level—having been admitted to the ICU due to severe hypertension after my daughter was born, I deeply understand the importance of early detection and the impact that an undiagnosed condition can have.

In Ontario, where there is a shortage of family doctors, regular blood pressure screenings become even more critical.¹ Dental hygienists often see their clients twice a year, presenting a unique opportunity to catch potentially life-threatening conditions before they escalate. A simple blood pressure screening not only helps prevent emergencies, such as myocardial infarctions in the dental office, but also serves as a vital referral point that can save lives.²

Being immersed in a program that grants access to the latest information has reinforced my belief that education is a lifelong endeavour. Even after graduation, dental hygienists must remain at the forefront of current research and practice, advocating passionately for their clients. I am committed to addressing the pressing issues in our field, supporting our profession, and championing the exceptional work of dental hygienists.

During my shadowing experiences in both independent and general practices, I observed a recurring challenge: there is often insufficient time to conduct the comprehensive assessments we are trained to perform. This issue is compounded by a lack of understanding among staff of the uniqueness of each client's needs—a core principle of the Standard of Care.

In a recent advocacy letter to Ontario's minister of health, I expressed concerns about the inadequate time allocated for new patient appointments and essential procedures, such as blood pressure screenings. I emphasized the systemic impact of



oral health care and the lifesaving potential of timely referrals made possible through interprofessional collaboration. With increased public support and education, we can bridge the gap between oral and cardiovascular health, ultimately reducing the stress on clinicians and allowing for longer, more comprehensive appointments.

I encourage students to explore causes that they are passionate about because we have the power to unite and set a precedent in our industry as change makers. Multiple health disparities exist in Canada and must be addressed. Possible solutions include expanding the dental hygiene scope of practice, improving access to oral health care in

remote and rural communities, and securing better funding and services for everyone. Another critical challenge is the lack of preventive oral health care for seniors living in long-term care facilities. Many people still don't fully understand the connection between oral health and systemic health. The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association advocates for the inclusion of dental hygienists in care teams within long-term care facilities to provide comprehensive oral health services.³ This approach not only addresses oral health issues but also contributes to the overall well-being of residents, as poor oral health has been linked to systemic conditions such as heart and lung diseases, diabetes, and stroke.³

To drive real change, we must engage with the right governing bodies and decision makers. I encourage you to take action: reach out to your local member of Parliament, your provincial minister of health, and your provincial minister of long-term care. Dental hygienists in Ontario should contact the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario. The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) and the Ontario Dental Hygienists Association (ODHA) advocate for change in the dental hygiene community and assist us in making it possible to have our voices heard!

While there may be resistance from those who do not fully grasp the details of our work, I see this challenge as an opportunity for change. As future leaders in dental hygiene, we have the power to innovate, improve clinical workflows, and elevate client-centred care—ultimately paving the way for interventions that can save lives.

References

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