



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

Delphic Research
June 2022

A National Oral Health Care Plan for Canadian Seniors

Making Progress Towards a Vision of Oral Health For All

A Policy Paper – Executive Summary





LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT OF CDHA

As Canadians, we take pride in our universal health care system because we collectively recognize that proper access to health care is vital. And while it is true that our health care system is world class, it isn't perfect.

Oral care is health care. Oral diseases are associated with various systemic health conditions such as diabetes, respiratory, and cardiovascular diseases as bacteria from the mouth can enter the body through the bloodstream and airways. When oral diseases aren't addressed early, Canadians often find themselves in doctors' offices and hospitals, costing our health care system an estimated \$1 billion annually in avoidable expenses. As essential members of the oral health care team, dental hygienists have been at the forefront of advocating for prevention as an oral health care strategy. We are often the first health professional a person sees when they enter a dental or dental hygiene clinic, and we typically spend more time with them than the dentist. While the regulations governing dental hygienists vary from province to province, one thing is clear: dental hygienists, working independently or as part of oral health care teams, play a vital role in preventing oral diseases and in helping Canadians maintain a healthy mouth.

Dental hygienists across Canada are acutely aware that our publicly funded health care system does not reflect how crucial oral health is to overall health. Only 6 percent of Canada's national dental expenditure is government funded — the second lowest rate world-wide among high-income countries.

Seniors, who often have trouble accessing vital oral health services, are especially vulnerable. Many older Canadians forego dental appointments and treatments because of cost alone, and issues surrounding geographical access and mobility only compound the situation.

It is inspiring to me that our association and dental hygienists across Canada are committed to driving change, calling for action from elected officials and policy makers at all levels. It's time to close the gaps that prevent lower-income seniors and seniors living in long-term care homes from accessing the oral health care that they need. As primary health care professionals, dental hygienists know how important oral health is and how crucial preventive care is for the well-being of our clients. As Canadians, we are disheartened and concerned by the failure to recognize oral health care as a critical part of the publicly funded health care system. It is time to make oral health a health priority and to establish a pan-Canadian plan to ensure that all Canadians, starting with the most vulnerable among us, have access to this care.

When it comes to supporting the oral health of our seniors, Canadians are united behind us. A recent Abacus survey found that 86% of respondents support federal funding to support low-income seniors.

The board of directors, staff, and members of the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association look forward to working collaboratively with health system leaders across the country to improve the health of Canadian seniors.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wendy Stewart". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Wendy Stewart,
President
Canadian Dental Hygienists Association

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ensuring access to oral health care for all Canadians should be an important priority for government, just as access to other health services are viewed as important priorities. Nonetheless, significant inequities exist around access and outcomes when it comes to oral health services, particularly for our most vulnerable populations. Over the years, the call for improved oral health services has grown louder and, finally, governments have started to pay more attention. In recent years, some provinces have moved forward with new programs to expand care to the most vulnerable, including new programs for seniors living in poverty. While progress is welcomed, the reach and impact of oral health programs have been extremely limited and, moreover, the benefits of progress have not been shared equally across the country. It's time for governments to come together and work towards a pan-Canadian framework to expand access to oral health services and address oral health inequities.

In late fall of 2019, the federal government made a commitment in the Speech from the Throne to explore universal dental care. This was followed by a request in the Minister of Health's mandate letter to "Work with Parliament to study and analyze the possibility of national dental care." (Dec 13, 2019). The movement of the federal government recognizing the importance of oral health care to overall health was encouraging.

A few months after this announcement, the world changed. The economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the capacity of government to support critical health issues, like the oral health of Canadians.

The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) is the collective national voice of over 30,000 dental hygienists in Canada, directly representing over 20,000 members, including students. CDHA has been advocating for many years to influence the national public policy environment to improve access to oral healthcare for Canadians. The pandemic did not halt this work, but we recognize and appreciate the capacity of the government to support new large-scale health initiatives during the height of the pandemic.

This policy paper sets out key, evidence-based recommendations, to support the oral health of the population that has been hardest hit throughout this pandemic – Canada's vulnerable seniors. This policy paper calls on the federal government to work with provincial and territorial governments, as well as provide funding, to support the expansion of publicly funded oral health services to lower income seniors on a pan-Canadian basis.

Please note that this paper was commissioned prior to the pandemic and the work and recommendations were made prior to the recent federal government announcement about a new federal dental care program.

A PAN-CANADIAN ORAL HEALTH PLAN FOR CANADA'S SENIORS

This paper calls on governments to work together to develop and implement a pan-Canadian approach to oral health coverage for lower-income seniors, age 65 and older.

CDHA, dental hygienists, and the entire oral health community wish to see equitable access to oral health services for all Canadians, regardless of where they might live or their income. It is time to start investing in oral health services, ensuring that vulnerable populations who currently lack access to dental insurance coverage or quality publicly funded programs have options for oral health care available to them.

Ensuring that all Canadians have access to high quality oral health care should be a high priority for everyone. However, this paper recognizes that governments and health systems alike face limitations on how quickly coverage gaps can be addressed to achieve that goal.

Another key consideration is the other resources needed to implement a new program and, in particular, the human resources. Indeed, one of the principal reasons cited for oral health care not having been included in Canadian Medicare from the outset was the lack of sufficient oral health providers to deliver the care. Where there has been a great deal of progress in growing the oral health professional workforce, the degree to which Canada has sufficient dentists, dental hygienists, dental therapists, denturists, and other trained personnel to meet the care gap is a factor that governments must consider and address as part of any plan to expand oral health care coverage.

This paper also takes into account another important factor, that of Canada's federal system and the recognition of health care generally as a matter of provincial jurisdiction. That being said, the recommendations included in this paper also recognize the important role that the federal government has played in supporting the development of a pan-Canadian framework around shared health priorities from coast-to-coast and the role that federal transfers to provincial/ territorial jurisdictions have played in bringing all parties to the table in the common interest of Canadians.

An Important Step Forward

It is true that years of underinvestment by government cannot all be addressed at once, particularly in light of competing priorities. However, that does not mean that governments can't move forward now to begin to close the gap in accessing care for at least some vulnerable populations. To that end, this paper proposes that governments immediately work to close the access gap for lower-income seniors, ensuring that all lower income seniors 65 years of age or over have equitable access to oral health care services.

In this regard, it is recommended that the federal government provide \$2 billion over five years towards provincial/territorial plans that ensure that Canadian seniors, wherever

they might live, would have access to a basket of preventive and basic oral care services intended to maintain good oral health and, consequently, better overall health.

As has been seen through numerous examples, in the past, federal leadership and federal funding have been important factors in achieving pan-Canadian progress on shared national priorities with their provincial and territorial partners in Confederation. Indeed, federal participation and federal funding transfers have been a critical catalyst to progress when it comes to expanding healthcare services on an equitable basis to Canadians, wherever in the country they might live.

Once again, the federal government can play a leading role in convening these discussions across provinces and territories, unifying a patchwork of public programs with the ultimate goal of improving seniors' access to oral health care across the country. The federal government's commitment to funding improvements and working collaboratively in setting minimum pan-Canadian requirements for provincial/territorial oral health care programs for lower income seniors is critical in delivering quality care across the country.

We also recognize that funding isn't the only factor limiting the pace of progress. Governments and leaders in oral health must also consider the need to expand the capacity of our oral health system so that it can deliver more care to more people. This will require careful planning by government and system leaders, working alongside organizations like the CDHA, other national and provincial oral health organizations, and all oral health care professionals.

To this end, this paper also recommends that agreements between provinces and territories and the federal government include a clear commitment to the development of strategies, plans, and performance metrics by each jurisdiction, with a public reporting mechanism on progress. Among other things, it is recommended that these plans consider the importance of health human resource and infrastructure planning, the locations, and settings where vulnerable seniors are in need of care, as well as their intentions to implement, direct, and coordinate health promotion activities such as:

- Building healthy public policy for better oral health
- Creating supportive environments for patients/clients and care providers
- Strengthening community action
- Develop personal oral health knowledge and skills
- Advancing greater integration of oral health services and professionals within broader care settings, particularly in long term care
- Integration of on-site oral health care facilities and services
- Building a growing knowledge base of information and data when it comes to understanding the oral health of Canadians

WHY A SENIORS-FIRST APPROACH

By taking action to advance the oral health of seniors, governments can help close the gap with respect to an important population for whom health inequities remain an issue. While it may not address every gap that currently exists, the approach outlined herein is achievable in the near term and targets a vulnerable population in need. If implemented as recommended, a new pan-Canadian approach to coverage for low-income seniors could provide access to hundreds of thousands more Canadian seniors who face barriers accessing the care they need to maintain their oral health, as well as their overall health.

Summary of Recommendations

That the Government of Canada commit to provide \$2 billion over five years to provincial/territorial governments in exchange for their commitment to recognize oral health care as a shared health priority.

It is further recommended that provincial and territorial governments each work towards agreements with the Government of Canada that commits to achieving the following:

- Implementation of a pan-Canadian oral health program for lower income seniors administered by provincial/territorial jurisdictions, based on strategies and plans developed in collaboration with experts and oral health stakeholders
- An agreement with respect to the development of indicators that will be tracked and reported publicly to measure progress on oral health status, access, etc. to be developed by government along with leaders in oral health
- Annual public reporting on progress achieved on the key indicators and implementation milestones

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