

# **Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance 2023 Pre-Budget Consultations**

## **By: The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association**

The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) is the collective, national voice of more than 30,000 dental hygienists in Canada, directly representing 20,000 individual members. Dental hygiene represents the sixth largest regulated health profession in the country.

October 2022

## List of Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1a:** That spending toward the development of a comprehensive, long-term national dental care program include the full range of Canada's oral health human resources (including dental hygienists) and preventive services to support, strengthen and sustain access to oral health care.
- **Recommendation 1b:** That the launch of the proposed Canada Dental Benefit and long-term national dental program include multi-year funding to oral health organizations to equip them with tools/resources in their direct support of oral health care providers who will be sharing information with the public in real time.
- **Recommendation 2:** That the federal government ensure funding to support the inclusion of oral health in the development of national standards for Canada's long-term care facilities and home care systems.
- **Recommendation 3:** That the federal government accelerate its plan to expand its current list of eligible professionals under its student loan forgiveness program, to help bring more dental hygienists to rural and remote communities.

## Context

**Good oral health is essential to overall health and well-being throughout the lifespan.**

**There cannot be health without oral health.**

### **What is oral health?**

Oral health is an integral part of overall health and well-being.

CDHA defines oral health as “the state of the mouth and associated structures being free from disease and, where future disease is inhibited, maintaining functions such as eating, talking, and smiling, contributing to overall health, well-being and quality of life.”

### **The importance of prevention**

Canada’s dental hygienists understand that oral hygiene impacts overall health, and that prevention is key.

As [essential oral health care providers](#), dental hygienists work every day to prevent and treat oral conditions and diseases by providing individualized preventive and therapeutic oral care services and treatments.

When we consider the health system and societal impacts related to untreated and late-treated oral conditions and diseases, evidence shows the importance of emphasizing prevention within all publicly financed oral health/dental policy and programming.

Too many vulnerable people in Canada face barriers that limit their access to oral health coverage and that’s why CDHA has long advocated for increasing access to preventive oral health services as our top priority.

**Recommendation 1a: That spending toward the development of a comprehensive, long-term national dental care program include the full range of Canada’s oral health human resources (including dental hygienists) and preventive services to support, strengthen and sustain access to oral health care.**

Canadians should be able to access the oral health care they require, regardless of where they live and without financial hardship.

CDHA acknowledges the introduction of [Bill C-31, An Act respecting cost of living relief measures related to dental care and rental housing](#), is progress towards the government’s plan to deliver dental coverage for families with low-incomes for roughly 7 to 9 million Canadians who are currently without dental insurance or do not have the ability to pay out of pocket.

To improve oral health outcomes for people and families in Canada, CDHA calls on government to ensure adequate funding in the development of its comprehensive, long-term national dental care program (as announced in [Budget 2022](#)) by including:

- The full range and capacity of Canada’s regulated oral health providers, including dental hygienists.
- An equitable standard of services and coverage that will apply to all eligible people across the country.
- Prevention services to maintain and enhance good overall health, and to detect, treat, and monitor minor conditions or diseases early before becoming major issues that may be painful, difficult and costly to treat in surgical rooms and hospital emergency departments.
- Accessibility and innovation to allow for the delivery of oral health services where people are, such as in mobile settings, schools, community centres, long-term care residences, and private homes.
- Public awareness and education campaigns to ensure that Canadians receive the information they need to access the program in a simple way.

**Quick facts:**

- The latest supply and demographic data on Canada’s health care providers reveals that dental hygiene is the 6th largest regulated health profession in Canada with over 30,000 registered dental hygienists. Source: [Canadian Institute for Health Information](#).
- In the context of essential prevention services provided by dental hygienists, this includes:
  - oral assessments (such as oral cancer screenings, risk assessments for caries and periodontal diseases)
  - oral hygiene education and health promotion

- periodontal debridement (scaling/root planing)
  - applications of anticaries agents (including fluoride varnishes, silver diamine fluoride, dental sealants)
  - placement of temporary restorations
- There are many shortfalls within the existing patchwork of public dental programs at the provincial/territorial level, which is why it is insufficient to simply expand them with more spending. Where programs are available, many vulnerable Canadians do not qualify for coverage leaving them with unmet needs. At the same time, many programs are limited in the scope of preventive services covered and fail to recognize dental hygienists as eligible providers, thus limiting accessibility to oral health care.

**Recommendation 1b: That the launch of the proposed Canada Dental Benefit and long-term national dental program include multi-year funding to oral health organizations to equip them with tools/resources in their direct support of oral health care providers who will be sharing information with the public in real time.**

An important consideration for national public awareness and communications campaigns for both the proposed Canada Dental Benefit and the long-term national dental program is the position of oral care providers who will be faced with a surge of questions from parents, caregivers, and households - and providing them with information.

In this regard, sharing information with the public will be a shared role and responsibility. That's why the need to coordinate the flow of timely and accessible information to oral health care providers, and in turn to Canadians will be paramount.

To extend the reach of the national public awareness campaign while at the same time, support the ability of oral health providers to provide fast and accurate information/messaging to the public, CDHA also calls on government to:

- Provide multi-year funding to oral health organizations (i.e., national, provincial, territorial) to equip them with tools and resources in their direct support of oral health care providers (in real time).

**Recommendation 2: That the federal government ensure funding to support the inclusion of oral health in the development national standards for Canada’s long-term care facilities and home care systems.**

Dental hygienists working with residents in long-term care (LTC) homes see firsthand many oral health issues and concerns that are not recognized by other health professionals or caregivers.

Oral conditions and diseases can cause pain, discomfort, difficulties chewing and swallowing, and are also associated with heart and lung diseases, diabetes, and stroke.

That is why dental hygienists are calling for the inclusion of oral health care in the development, implementation, funding and accountabilities for national standards in long-term care. It is more important than ever to accelerate strong, consistent, and tangible strategies to meet the oral health needs of Canada’s aging population and the [more than 400,000 residents](#) in LTC homes across the country.

CDHA calls on government to respond to the oral health needs of residents in LTC homes by directing spending in the development and implementation of national standards to:

- Fund dedicated positions for qualified oral health care providers to work in LTC homes alongside other professionals.
- Ensure a comprehensive program of oral health services for residents to meet their needs, including oral health assessments, personalized oral health care services, and daily mouth care.
- Provide oral health education to all non-oral health workers, providers, and caregivers caring for residents who may have limited knowledge of oral health. Staff education is an important way of facilitating referrals for those residents who require consultation with an oral health professional. It is further recommended that government consult with knowledge-based experts in oral health including representatives from professional dental hygiene associations, educators, and researchers to develop and deliver such education.

Collaboration among all jurisdictions and new targeted federal funding and accountability systems will be necessary to realize these goals.

**Quick facts:**

- In the context of long-term care homes, there are many approaches to oral health care delivery, most of which involve external service arrangements. Currently, many dental hygienists deliver services to residents in LTC either by using fully

equipped dental operatories (specialized workspaces) inside the facilities or by bringing their own mobile equipment. Such arrangements are primarily based on the resident's or family's ability to pay for dental hygiene services.

**Quotes:**

- "Despite the fact that poor oral health of elderly long-term care (LTC) residents has long been identified by health care providers and confirmed through many studies, there is a surprising lack of progress being made to improve this situation. [Compton and Kline, 2015](#) | *Canadian Journal of Dental Hygiene*

**Recommendation 3: That the federal government accelerate its plan to expand its current list of eligible professionals under its student loan forgiveness program, to help bring more dental hygienists to rural and remote communities.**

People living in rural and remote communities generally have less access to health services than urban areas. Access to dental hygienists is essential for oral health, overall health, and well-being.

CDHA calls on government to accelerate its plan to expand its current list of eligible professionals under its student loan forgiveness program (as outlined in the [mandate letter](#) for the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion Mandate Letter and confirmed in [Budget 2022](#)), to help bring more dental hygienists to the rural and remote communities where access to care and staff shortages are real challenges.

CDHA has long advocated for the addition of dental hygienists to the eligibility list for the Canada Student Loan Forgiveness benefit. We see it as a good solution to incentivizing more health professionals to choose to return or relocate to a rural or remote community to help underserved rural or remote communities get the primary health care they need, including those who are most vulnerable such as seniors (aging population), people/families with low or fixed incomes, and Indigenous peoples.

Attracting and retaining dental hygienists working in rural/remote communities means:

- More dental hygienists in communities typically underserved by dentists, and in a variety of settings, including independently owned dental hygiene clinics, schools, public health clinics, mobile clinics, community centres, and homes.
- More dental hygienists helping more Canadians enjoy optimum health by providing individualized, accessible oral care services and treatments.
- Increased access to essential prevention services provided by dental hygienists, including oral assessments (such as oral cancer screenings, risk assessments for caries and periodontal diseases), oral hygiene education and health promotion, periodontal debridement (scaling/root planing), applications of anticaries agents (including fluoride varnishes, silver diamine fluoride, dental sealants) and placement of temporary restorations.
- Increased access to dental hygienist services that can alleviate pain related to dental caries with the placement of temporary restorations (by using interim stabilization therapy or atraumatic restorative treatment) and can arrest the progression of caries with silver diamine fluoride applications.

Furthermore, when we consider positive implications at the health system level, offering student loan forgiveness to dental hygienists and other oral health providers, means:

- Significant potential for people and families in rural and remote communities to access local oral health care in a more sustainable way and in a timely fashion.
- Fewer downstream visits to hospital emergency departments by people seeking temporary relief of their dental/oral pain.
- Reductions in the extent of public program expenditures and reliance on [medical transportation for dental care](#) that cannot be obtained in a person's community of residence.
- Recognition of challenges and pressures in Canada's health human resources that existed well before the COVID-19 pandemic.