

# **Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance 2021 Pre-Budget Consultations**

**By: The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association**

The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association is the collective, national voice of more than 29,000 dental hygienists in Canada, directly representing 20,000 individual members. Dental hygiene represents the sixth largest regulated health profession in the country.

August 2020

## List of Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** That the federal government initiate the exploration and development of universal dental care for Canadians.
- **Recommendation 2:** That the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces, territories, and oral health system experts, ensure the inclusion of oral health in the development of national standards for Canada's long-term care and home care systems.
- **Recommendation 3:** That the federal government expand the eligibility of the existing Canada Student Loan forgiveness measure to additional health professionals (i.e., beyond family doctors and nurses) who work in designated rural or remote communities. Specifically, the expansion should include dental hygienists. Note this is part of a separate submission from the Extended Health Professionals Coalition, of which CDHA is a part.

## Context

**The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) believes that the key to a prosperous Canada lies in the health of its people. Our recommendations reflect our belief that oral health is fundamental to overall health. Restarting the Canadian economy as it recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic requires a greater recognition and consideration of oral health in public health and public policy responses across all orders of government.**

### What is Oral Health?

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

The World Health Organization defines oral health as “a key indicator of overall health, well-being and quality of life. It encompasses a range of diseases and conditions that include dental caries, periodontal disease, tooth loss, oral cancer, oral manifestations of HIV infection, oro-dental trauma, noma and birth defects such as cleft lip and palate”..”

### The public health burden of oral diseases – global snapshot

- Oral diseases pose a major health burden for many countries and affect people throughout their lifetime, causing pain, discomfort, disfigurement and even death.
- In July 2019, *The Lancet* focused on oral health, and observed that oral diseases, including tooth decay, gum disease, and oral cancers, affect almost half of the global population, with untreated dental decay the most common health condition worldwide.
- Treatment for oral health conditions is expensive and is usually not part of universal health coverage. In most high-income countries, dental treatment averages 5% of total health expenditure and 20% of out-of-pocket health expenditure.
- Most oral health conditions are largely preventable and can be treated in their early stages.

### The public health burden of oral diseases – Canadian snapshot

- Like many other countries around the world, Canada faces challenges providing the most vulnerable segments of its population with the oral health services they require.
- In Canada, an estimated 2.26 million schooldays are missed each year due to dental-related illness and tooth decay accounts for one-third of all day surgeries performed on children between the ages of 1 and 5.
- The use of dental care services is largely influenced by insurance coverage and the ability to pay out of pocket for the expenses. In 2018, 22.4% of Canadians (roughly 6.8 million people) avoided visiting a dental professional due to cost.

## **Recommendation 1: That the federal government initiate the exploration and development of universal dental care for Canadians.**

Prior to the pandemic, CDHA expressed its support for the federal government's identification of universal dental care in its agenda as set out in the:

- Speech from the Throne that opened the 43rd session of Parliament (December 2019);
- Expectations and priorities described in the mandate letter sent from the Prime Minister to the Minister of Health (December 13, 2019); and
- List of future studies to be undertaken by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health (February 26, 2020).

In recent public opinion polling conducted for CDHA with over 2,000 Canadians in January 2019, it was found that

- 4-in-10 Canadians do not have access to dental benefits. Those without coverage are most likely to be the elderly, have a lower income, live in a rural area, or live in Atlantic Canada or Quebec.
- 56% of Canadians over age 60 have no dental benefits coverage.
- More than 1-in-5 Canadians have not accessed professional oral care in over two years.

Since the reopening of dental services across the country, dental hygienists are doing their part to continue to improve the oral health of Canadians through the delivery of oral health services, education and health promotion. As primary health care providers, dental hygienists are experts in oral health promotion and disease prevention and recognize that good oral health is vital for physical and mental well-being.

The devastating impact of COVID-19 on Canada's system of care illustrated the importance of having a strong, accessible public health care system to protect our communities. The pandemic has also had the effect of unveiling many structural inequities in Canada's health care system. It is not unreasonable to expect that many of the broader issues relating to the burden of oral diseases and access to oral health for vulnerable groups that existed across the country prior to the onset of COVID-19, have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. We think of jobless Canadians, low-income families, seniors, Indigenous peoples, and others.

Currently, millions of Canadians do not have access to professional oral care, which has an impact on overall health. While we take great pride as a nation in universally available services, oral care continues to be funded largely from private insurance or out of pocket by Canadians who have the means. With millions of Canadians now facing unemployment or underemployment, the availability of workplace benefits to support access to oral care is expected to diminish, which adds urgency to this recommendation.

We encourage the federal government to immediately initiate a study on a universal dental care program for all Canadians as established in the mandate of the Health Minister. Health Canada should commit resources to studying universal dental care now so appropriate measures can be implemented when government revenues recover from the added expense of the COVID-19 pandemic response.

CDHA and dental hygiene experts stand ready to support these efforts towards ensuring that those who need help the most are supported.

**Recommendation 2: That the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces, territories and oral health system experts, ensure the inclusion of oral health in the development of national standards for Canada's long-term care and home care systems.**

During her May 11, 2020 update on Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic with other federal ministers and health officials, Health Minister Patty Hajdu spoke about how the pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in long-term-care and congregate settings. "I think the longer conversation is, what do we need to do collaboratively with provinces and territories to move from a place of guidelines to a place of standards, and I think that's the important conversation that needs to happen," she said. "This COVID crisis has shone a light in an area that needs dramatic reform," she added.

And later when the Prime Minister addressed Canadians from outside his home in Ottawa about the federal government's response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, he said in response to the then crisis in Quebec and Ontario long-term care homes hard-hit by COVID-19 on May 27, 2020 that "we need to do a better job of caring for seniors".

On these points, CDHA could not have agreed more. That's because dental hygienists understand that the need for good oral health continues as people age.

Older Canadians are often infrequent users of oral care services. Many older adults, especially those who rely on others for care, have poor oral hygiene and high rates of untreated oral disease. These preventable oral diseases frequently result in more costly emergency procedures and are associated with more serious health complications.

**More about the oral health of older people**

- The most common oral conditions among older people are tooth loss, dental caries, periodontitis, dry mouth and oral precancer/cancer. These all can compromise older peoples' quality of life.
- More than 80% of elderly people have chronic health conditions, including arthritis, cataracts, back pain, cardiovascular disorders and diabetes mellitus. These conditions typically worsen with advancing age, eventually restricting daily activities, including oral hygiene activities and regular access to dental care.
- Poor oral health can adversely affect quality of life by imposing a physiological burden, particularly among elderly people.

Related to COVID-19, there is recent research examining the connection between COVID-19 complications and oral health. British researchers have explored the connection between high bacterial load in the mouth and post-viral complications, and how improving oral health may reduce the risk of complications from COVID-19.

**Fortunately, daily mouth care can improve both oral and overall health.**

**That's why conversations about how we care for our elders must give particular attention to oral health.**

And to accomplish this, CDHA is here to support all orders of government in improving oral and overall health outcomes for Canadian seniors.

In particular, we ask that the federal government lead work, in partnership with the provinces, territories and oral health experts, in the development of long-term care and homecare guidelines and other supports for daily oral health care (including regular professional preventive care). In addition, we ask the government to increase allocated funding for long-term healthcare to provinces and territories to ensure long-term care facilities are able to improve overall care.

**Recommendation 3: That the federal government expand the eligibility of the existing Canada Student Loan forgiveness to additional health professionals (i.e., beyond family doctors and nurses) who work in designated rural or remote communities. Specifically, the expansion should include dental hygienists.**

Readers are referred to a separate submission by the **Extended Healthcare Professionals Coalition**, a group of 11 national organizations of which CDHA is a part.

Highlights of that submission are provided below as a brief summary.

- Together, EHPC's recommendation reflects our shared priority of seeing increased access to extended health services for Canadians living in rural and remote communities. Restarting the Canadian economy as it recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic requires helping more Canadians in under-served rural and remote communities get the health care they deserve. EHPC's recommendation promotes the consideration and recognition of regulated health care services that are distinct from medicine and nursing through the loan forgiveness component of the Canada Student Loans Program.
- EHPC also knows that access to these extended health care services in rural and remote communities remains an ongoing challenge for many Canadians. More than 6 million Canadians live in rural areas (approximately 20% of the population). Canadians living in small, northern and geographically isolated communities do not have equitable access to the full range of health services enjoyed by individuals living in urban centres. Geographic, coupled with workforce constraints, perpetuate these issues and make health care delivery particularly challenging.
- Extending the eligibility of the Canada Student Loan forgiveness measure to include dental hygienists has the potential to increase access to more oral health services for Canadians living in underserved rural and remote communities.
- EHPC points to strengthening the loan forgiveness measure as an answer to helping more Canadians get the health (including oral health) services they deserve.

*\*Please note: references, studies and peer-reviewed sources omitted for length, available upon request.*