

Written Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health

Study: Canada's Health Workforce



**CANADIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION
ASSOCIATION DENTAIRE CANADIENNE**

Submitted by the Canadian Dental Association

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About the Canadian Dental Association and Dentistry in Canada

The Canadian Dental Association (CDA) represents the dental profession across Canada and is a trusted brand and source of information for and about the dental profession, on national and international issues. The CDA is the national voice for dentistry dedicated to the promotion of optimal oral health, an essential component of general health, and to the advancement and leadership of the dental profession. The CDA is a federation of Canada's provincial and territorial dental associations (PDAs), representing dentists from coast to coast to coast.

As of early 2022, there were 25,500 licensed dentists in Canada. In addition, there are over 30,000 dental hygienists and an estimated 26,000 to 29,000 dental assistants in Canada. If one includes other administrative staff in a dental office, the dental sector represents a private workforce of roughly 100,000 workers.

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Dental Assistants Labour Shortage

Dental assistants are the glue that hold dental offices together. It is a skilled profession, and eight provinces require licensing or registration. The Economic and Social Development Canada (ESDC) recently reclassified dental assisting as a “skilled profession” in the National Occupational Classification (NOC). Dental assistants provide a necessary second set of hands to dentists during most dental procedures, from fillings to extractions to root canals.

Labour and workplace environment challenges regarding dental assistants have been a longstanding concern of both dental assistants and dentists. Even before the pandemic, the number of dental assistants was an obstacle to meeting the oral health needs of Canadians. In 2019, 36% of dental offices had vacant dental assistant positions. From 2010 to 2020, the ratio of certified dental assistants to dentists entering the workforce fell from over 3.21 to 1 to 1.20 to 1.

Across many jurisdictions, there is a need for higher trained (certified) dental assistants, and because of the expected attrition rates, there would need to be at least two new certified dental assistants annually for each dentist. Additionally, due to changes in technological and infection control in practices, there is a tendency across all practices to require additional trained dental assistants.

Factors that have influenced this shortage vary from province to province, but broadly include:

- insufficient capacity to train new licensed/certified Dental Assistants;
- limitations on the scope of practice of both unlicensed/uncertified dental office staff and licensed/certified Dental Assistants;
- adequate compensation (salary and benefits) in a competitive labour market;
- workplace concerns such as stress, mental health, and flexible hours; and
- departure of dental assistants for other professions or due to external factors

The situation has deteriorated over the past decade, accentuated by the broader labour market challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic: dentists need more formally trained, licensed dental assistants to manage new health and safety guidelines, but attrition rates have worsened.

COVID-19 and Dentistry

COVID-19 has had a transformative impact on the health and wellbeing of Canadians. Despite the risks of disease transmission in dental offices, dentists have continued to provide important emergency and routine to their patients. While the pandemic has brought to light new challenges for the delivery of dental care, it has also exacerbated existing problems Canadians face in achieving and maintaining their oral health and in receiving dental treatment.

In response to COVID-19, new health and safety measures have been quickly adopted by dental offices across Canada. As a result, there are no known cases of COVID-19 transmission between practitioner and patient since the onset of the pandemic. However, these measures require enhanced safety protocols, additional personal protective equipment (PPE), purchase of new equipment, and office renovations. Providing dental treatment has become more difficult and more costly.

According to a recent Abacus survey, one third of Canadians say their dentistry habits (the frequency with which they visit a dentist and what procedures they go for) are still different since the pandemic started and have not returned to normal. This is particularly the case with children, particularly those who are unvaccinated or partially vaccinated. As well 15% say that their dental benefits are now worse than they were prior to the pandemic.

Labour Shortage Impact

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic - with respect to the elevated risk of COVID-19 transmission during dental procedures, the strain of working in more isolated environments with additional PPE, and the disruption of virtual schooling and childcare closures for those with children - has exacerbated the labour shortage issue. Now, the post-pandemic reality has created a further challenge: hiring and retaining dental assistants. Over the past six months, the inability to hire and retain dental assistants has become the number one challenge cited by Canadian dentists.

Support from a dental assistant is vital to a dentist's ability to provide a wide range of treatments and ensure a well-functioning office. Over 70% of dentists believe that a lack of certified dental assisting staff has had an impact on the efficiency of their practices. Over 56% of dentists say that a lack of dental assisting staff has had an impact on the efficiency of their practice. This translates into postponement of appointments for important dental care, as well as for routine dental preventive care. Additionally, just before the pandemic over one-third of dentists reported having unfilled dental assisting positions in their practice, this proportion has likely increased after the pandemic.

In conjunction with partners, such as the Canadian Dental Assistants Association (CDAA), the CDA is responding to these concerns by beginning to develop an action plan to address the reported shortage of dental assistants, including training, recruitment, and retention. In addition, the CDA and CDAA has submitted a proposal to ESDC's Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program (SWSP).

Our project "Building the Professional Dental Assisting Workforce of the Future" seeks to address the many factors impacting the attrition of dental assistants from their profession, by providing mental health and wellness training for dental office staff, human resources training for dentists and office managers, increased access to certified dental assisting programs through the development of an online-based curriculum, as well as to develop action plans addressing interprovincial labour mobility and better integration of immigrants into the dental workforce.

Currently, it can take up to 18 months to become a licensed dental assistant. To increase access to dental assisting training programs, a primarily online accredited curriculum can remove barriers to individuals who currently cannot access in-person theoretical training, requiring their attendance only for in-person clinical training. This allows for individuals who reside in rural and remote communities to participate in a complete, accredited program and reduce their in-person attendance to just their practical training.

Our hope is that through this project we will see the following outcomes:

- a better workplace environment to deal with concerns such as stress and mental health;
- dental office staff members gain the tools and knowledge necessary for employee recruitment and retention in a competitive labour market

- the sector will see an increase in Canada's capacity to train new licensed/certified Dental Assistants; and
- the sector will gain a better understanding on improving labour mobility for dental assistants and how to better integrate newcomers/equity-deserving groups into the dental assisting work force

Recommendations

The CDA is aware that healthcare human resource and workforce issues, including labour shortages, have been made worse by the pandemic and are widespread across health sectors and professions. Roughly one-third of healthcare in Canada is delivered in private settings, such as dental offices, and any initiatives to increase the supply of healthcare workers in the public system risks heightening the workforce challenges faced by private-sector providers.

Recommendation 1: That government initiatives seeking to address labour concerns in Canada's healthcare sector consider the significant portion of healthcare in Canada delivered outside of the publicly funded system, in private settings such as dental offices.

Recommendation 2: That the government support the Canadian Dental Association and the Canadian Dental Assistants Association in their plans to "Build the dental assisting workforce of the future" through Employment and Social Development Canada's Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program.

Recommendation 3: That the government support post-secondary institutions in their shift towards online-based curricula, particularly for health care training programs.

Recommendation 4: That the government examine ways to better integrate, recruit, and attract recent immigrants to Canada into healthcare related careers such as dental assisting.

The CDA encourages this committee to consider these workforce concerns when making recommendations to government. Focusing solely on the labour concerns and challenges of Canada's public health system could have a deleterious effect on healthcare delivered in private settings. Increasing recruitment into some professions, or mandating wages for others, can intensify shortages for the rest.

The CDA looks forward to collaborating closely with the federal government on advancing solutions that address concerns in the provision of oral health in Canada.