

House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills, and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA)

The Canadian Dental Assistants' Association on Labour Shortages, Working Conditions, and the Care Economy

The Canadian Dental Assistants' Association (CDAA) is acutely interested in HUMA's current study on labour shortages and workers' conditions within the Canadian economy. Of particular interest to the CDAA, is the Committee's interest in the professions that have been on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic – the care sector. As the national professional association for dental assistants in Canada for the past 77 years, the CDAA is pleased to bring forward the perspective of dental assistants on this important issue, and those issues impacting the provision of oral healthcare to Canadians.

It is estimated there are over 60,000 licensed/certified dental assistants in Canada providing important, essential contributions to the oral health team in a variety of professional settings, both private and public.

As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic has and continues to impact the health, professional and personal lives of all Canadians. This impact was acutely felt across the oral health sector when in 2020, the dental team was designated as an essential service provider to Canadians. Dental assistants returned to work while simultaneously facing many unknowns, rapidly shifting public health protocols, and a lack of personal protective equipment. In addition, dental assistants continued to work despite fearing for their safety, their patients' safety, their colleagues' safety, and the safety of their loved ones. There is no doubt the contributions dental assistants have made and continue to make as essential front-line health care professionals during this global health crisis, positively impacted the overall health of Canadians. Formally trained licensed/certified dental assistants are skilled professionals who provide the highest standards in infection control protocols to ensure the safety of the public; the importance of this skill and knowledge amid a global pandemic, must not be understated. Ensuring the safety of Canadians is a primary reason the CDAA advocates for a formally trained licensed/certified dental assistant workforce and for healthy workplace environments. Healthy, formally trained, licensed/certified dental assistants will continue to improve the health of Canadians, protect their patients, increase productivity, and contribute to building a strong economy.

The importance of including private health care sector

While the CDAA appreciates HUMA's focus on the care sector and especially those public health professionals who have directly treated Canadians throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDAA encourages HUMA to consider studying the challenges faced by those care professions that are directly supporting the health of Canadians, but who provide their services outside of the framework of public health delivery. In addition, the CDAA recommends the Committee recognize oral health as an integral component of overall health and as a result, consider the experiences of all oral health professionals during its study.

Longstanding challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

Oral health professionals, including dental assistants, are facing similar issues to their colleagues in the public health sector with respect to labour retention, attrition, and unhealthy workplace environments. Like our colleagues in public health, the COVID-19 pandemic served to highlight and, in some instances, exacerbate, existing labour force challenges experienced by dental assistants.

Beginning in early 2019, the Canadian Dental Assistants Association (CDAA) was hearing reports from members and non-members about a shortage of decent work opportunities, while employers were



simultaneously reporting a shortage of dental assistants (DAs). Later that same year, the CDAA in collaboration with the Canadian Dental Association (CDA), commissioned researchers at the University of Ottawa and Queens' University to perform a rapid literature review, to develop and disseminate a nationwide survey, and to deliver a final report and analysis on the factors and realities impacting employment of dental assistants in Canada.

The data garnered from the *Factors, Realities, and Experiences of Employment as a Dental Assistant in Canada (FREEDAC)* report demonstrated there may not be a shortage of DAs entering the profession, but a surplus of those leaving before retirement; attrition rates further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

- **Remuneration in a high-stress environment:** Dental assisting is highly feminized (99% identify as female) and is at risk for a chronic wage gap; this gap is even wider for women of colour and Indigenous women (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018). While the extent of the wage equity gap for dental assisting was not measured in the 2019 *FREEDAC* study, 38.8% of DAs reported feeling unfairly compensated for their contributions to the oral health care team. During the pandemic in late 2020, a survey found that 44% of DAs believe they are not fairly compensated given the higher level of risk they experience at work due to the Covid-19 pandemic; an increase of 5.2% pre-pandemic. Further, 85% of DAs reported experiencing no change to their salary or hourly rate because of the Covid-19 pandemic and 7% reported working supplementary hours but only receiving compensation for regularly scheduled hours. In addition, 8% of respondents transitioned from full-time employment to part-time employment at their employer's request. These remuneration issues are impacting the attrition rate within the profession and will continue to do so as DAs seek more flexible work arrangements, increased benefits and less high-risk professions offering higher remuneration and opportunities for advancement. To examine remuneration and employment issues more in depth, the CDAA will undertake a job market survey of DAs later this year. It would be our pleasure to share our findings with the Committee once our study is complete.
- **Stress, mental health, and the need for a healthy workplace environment:** The CDAA strongly believes that all dental assistants are entitled to work in a healthy environment to maintain their overall health, both mental and physical. There is no doubt that dental offices, particular during a pandemic, can be a very high stress environment. In a 2020 survey of our members, 54% of DAs reported their work environment has become increasingly stressful and difficult since the beginning of the pandemic. Comparing this to the pre-pandemic findings from CDAA's 2019 *Healthy and Respectful Workplace Study*, where 66% of responding DAs reported they experienced stress and 61% reported they were considering quitting their job because of it, it is not a shock to see high attrition rates across the profession. Surely, following the pandemic, similar upward trending stress levels are being felt by many professionals across the care sector. Further, CDAA's *Healthy and Respectful Workplace Study* also noted that DAs across Canada have experienced some form of harassment, bullying, abuse and/or violent behavior over the course of their career from their employer (50%), from patients (43%), from co-workers (42%), and from office managers (33%); findings that align with the Government of Canada's 2016 findings that workers in health-related industries reported they were more likely to experience harassment in the workplace than in any other sector. In addition, 35% of responding DAs noted they quit their job because of mistreatment they experienced in their workplace. The CDAA suggests that consideration be given to include mandatory training for care sector professionals on soft skills such as effective and healthy communication, anti-harassment, socio-cultural awareness, and conflict resolution training. Similar to their colleagues across the care sector, respect, healthy communication, easily accessible mental health resources, commitment to teamwork and positive leadership are key features that DAs have identified as components of a healthy and respectful workplace.



- **Lack of dental assisting profession-specific data.** The lack of data on Canadian dental assistants is so acute that even the total number of working DAs in Canada is not certain; this is a result of an uneven regulatory landscape wherein training and licensure are not required for a DA to work in Ontario, Quebec, and the Territories. For the past seven years, the CDAA has committed time and resources to gathering data on the profession, however, the need for data is ever-expanding and resources are limited. The CDAA acknowledges that without comprehensive data on dental assisting, decisions and initiatives impacting this profession will be made using incomplete data that may be unaligned with the reality of dental assistants. With limited resources, many stakeholders collecting incomplete data, and no longitudinal studies, planning, conducting trend analysis, and forecasting is a steep hill to climb for a volunteer-based association such as the CDAA, both nationally and provincially/territorially; without comprehensive data on our profession, it is difficult to effectively address the future oral health care needs of Canadians. For this reason, the CDAA suggests the federal government should lead in creating a coordinating entity that will support the collection of standardized, complete, and accurate data for all health professions, including dental assisting. Health professions need the assistance and leadership of government to ensure associations like the CDAA (who struggle with coordinating and interpreting data from various stakeholders in inconsistent formats over various timelines with differing or incomplete data), can proactively meet the evolving needs of their profession and Canadians.

Collaborating with industry colleagues

The CDAA sees the labour issues facing the dental assisting profession and the oral health sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for inter-professional collaboration. Working together across not only the oral health sector, but across the care sector writ-large, is critical to addressing the working conditions and labour shortages experienced by DAs and their colleagues in the care sector. For this reason, the CDAA is pleased to be a member of the Organization for Health Action (HEAL) where our Association can collaborate, network, and discuss issues facing the sector.

Earlier this year, the CDAA recently partnered with the Canadian Dental Association to submit a project proposal to the Department of Employment and Skills Development's Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program that seeks to address the factors impacting the attrition of dental assistants. As well, the CDAA will support the Canadian Health Workforce Network (CHWN), on a project focusing on addressing the harms of COVID-19 on the health of the Canadian Health Workforce.

Addressing the needs of dental assistants, and in fact all essential health sector workers, is fundamental to ensuring Canadians receive the highest quality care at the time they need it the most. Like their essential health sector colleagues, dental assistants deserve to work in environments where they not only survive, but thrive.

