



House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance – Pre-budget Consultations 2014

This brief is submitted by: The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA)

Executive Summary

Oral health is essential for overall wellness, and it is an integral part of physical, social, and mental well-being. Dental hygienists are primary oral health care professionals specializing in services related to clinical therapy, oral health education, and health promotion, and play a critical role in the oral health of Canadians.

To ensure that all Canadians have access to cost-effective and sustainable oral health care services in order to reach their full potential, CDHA urges the Standing Committee on Finance to include the following three recommendations in the 2015 federal budget:

1. Investing in the Oral Health of Aboriginal Peoples

CDHA recommends that the federal government reduce the health care treatment cost pressures and reduce in-hospital dental surgery for children through an increased investment in Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) and, specifically, the Children's Oral Health Initiative (COHI). This initiative has demonstrated great success and effectiveness in helping vulnerable Canadians to achieve optimal oral health, and has the potential to support even greater numbers of Aboriginal peoples if additional funding is provided.

2. Optimize Health Human Resources in Rural or Remote Areas

Dental hygienists are the sixth-largest group of health care professionals in Canada; however, they are underrepresented in rural, remote, and northern communities, especially in First Nations and Inuit communities. When we compare the populations of the provinces and territories with the number of dental hygienists practicing in each, we find significant differences across Canada. To alleviate this situation, CDHA recommends that the federal government include dental hygiene graduates in existing and new financial incentive programs, in order to optimize health human resources in rural, remote, and northern communities.

3. Community Water Fluoridation

CDHA recommends that the federal government invest in targeted community water fluoridation initiatives to ensure that fluoridation is maintained in municipalities and extended to additional communities, through collaboration with provincial and territorial governments.

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Community water fluoridation is a proven safe, effective, economical, and equitable means of preventing dental caries in all age groups while also easing the heavy burden of dental decay worldwide.

Background

Serving the profession since 1963, the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) is the collective national voice of more than 27,000 registered dental hygienists working in Canada, directly representing over 17,000 individual members. As primary oral health care professionals, dental hygienists provide services related to clinical therapy, oral health education, and health promotion, and play a vital role in helping to ensure optimal oral and overall health for Canadians.

Oral health is essential for overall wellness, and it is an integral part of physical, social, and mental well-being. There is a direct connection between oral health and the overall health and well-being of all Canadians. In fact, periodontal disease has been linked to a number of serious illnesses including diabetes, heart disease, and infections in the lungs.

Of great concern to the dental hygiene profession is the fact that the majority of oral health expenditures are incurred in treating oral diseases after they arise. CDHA proposes that the federal government make an investment in more upstream oral health promotion and disease prevention initiatives. Compared with other OECD countries, Canada is ranked among the highest in mean per capita spending on dental care, but among the lowest in terms of public share.¹ The high cost of dental services, the lack of access to care among the most vulnerable Canadians, and the low levels of investment in prevention point to the need to create more efficient, sustainable, and cost-effective oral health policies in Canada.

In order to ensure that all Canadians have access to cost-effective and sustainable oral health care, CDHA has developed the following written submission for the Standing Committee on Finance and is proposing the following three recommendations for inclusion in the 2015 federal budget.

Recommendation 1

Investing in the Oral Health of Aboriginal Peoples

¹ Ramraj C, Weitzner E, Figueiredo R & Quinonez C. A macroeconomic review of dentistry in Canada in the 2000s. *J Can Dent Assoc.* 2014;80:55



The 2013 Inuit Oral Health Survey reveals unacceptably high rates of oral disease among Canada's Inuit peoples living in the North. Survey results indicate that, in Inuit communities, tooth decay is two to three times worse than among average Canadians. Most oral diseases can be prevented; therefore, a fundamental prevention focus will ultimately decrease hospital and treatment costs and contribute to fiscal restraint, while improving the oral health of Canadians.

The Children's Oral Health Initiative (COHI) is a program that strives to improve the oral health of First Nations living on-reserve and Inuit living in Inuit communities. Oral health professionals, including dental hygienists, deliver a broad range of oral health services to children ages 0-7, their parents, caregivers and pregnant women, including oral disease prevention and clinical services, and education relating to the importance of healthy oral hygiene practices. This initiative has already demonstrated successful results; the number of clients who have accessed this service tripled between 2002 and 2008. The COHI initiative has potential to support an even greater number of Aboriginal peoples if additional funding is provided.

CDHA recommends that the federal government reduce the health care treatment cost pressures and reduce in-hospital dental surgery for children through an increased investment in Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch and, specifically, COHI.

Increased investment in the oral health of Aboriginal peoples should produce the following outcomes:

- reduced medical transportation costs
- reduced emergency hospital visits due to dental disease
- increased access to care for priority populations, thus meeting their health needs more effectively and efficiently
- sustained economic recovery and growth. Oral health investments result in a stronger economy, since healthy people are more productive.

Recommendation 2

Optimize Health Human Resources in Rural or Remote Areas

There is widespread agreement that, although dental hygienists are the sixth-largest group of health care professionals in Canada, they are underrepresented in rural, remote, and northern communities, especially in First Nations and Inuit communities. When we compare the populations of the provinces and territories with the number of dental hygienists practicing in each, we find significant differences across Canada.

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To alleviate this situation, CDHA recommends that the federal government include dental hygiene graduates in existing and new financial incentive programs, in order to optimize health human resources in rural, remote, and northern communities.

There are several advantages to bringing dental hygiene prevention practices to rural and remote areas:

- increased access to care, which would more effectively and efficiently meet population health needs;
- reduced downstream costs for treatment and flights to urban hospitals to address severe tooth decay;
- increased concentration of oral health professionals, making these regions more attractive to new business ventures.

In order to address the shortage of health care professionals in rural communities, the federal government has committed to forgive a portion of Canada Student Loans for new family physicians, nurse practitioners, and nurses. The federal government should expand this incentive program to include dental hygienists.

The federal government could also optimize health human resources with the following financial incentives:

- grants, scholarships, and bursaries in exchange for a 3- or 4-year return-of-service commitment in underserved communities;
- wage incentives or a guaranteed minimum income;
- tax credits for practicing in remote areas.

Recommendation 3

Community Water Fluoridation

Community water fluoridation is an excellent public health initiative that benefits all Canadians, regardless of their social or economic status. It is recognized as the single most effective public health measure to prevent tooth decay and was ranked by the Centers for Disease Control as one of the top ten greatest public health achievements of the 20th century.² Community water fluoridation is a safe, effective, economical, and equitable means of preventing dental caries in all age groups while also easing the heavy burden of dental decay worldwide.

² Carstairs C, Elder R. Expertise, health, and popular opinion: debating water fluoridation, 1945-80. *Can Hist Rev.* 2008;89(3):345-71.



CDHA recommends that the federal government invest in targeted community water fluoridation initiatives in order to maintain fluoridation in municipalities and extend it to additional communities, through collaboration with provincial and territorial governments. The delivery of community water fluoridation for prevention and equity purposes is supported by over 90 national (e.g., Health Canada, Canadian Association of Public Health Dentistry, Canadian Dental Association, Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Dental Hygienists Association) and international (e.g., World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control, US Food and Drug Administration) professional health organizations.

Adjusting fluoride levels in community water systems is not only cost-effective but also cost saving, which is rare for public health interventions. Every \$1 invested in adding fluoride to drinking water saves \$38 in dental care—that's a Return on Investment of 3700%. Through the establishment of a dedicated funding stream, the government will save money now and in the future, while improving the oral health of Canadians.

The benefits of community water fluoridation include:

- the prevention of tooth decay through equitable, sustainable, and cost-effective means a reduction in both population-level tooth decay and the negative consequences associated with tooth decay, such as pain, infection, emergency room hospital visits related to dental disease, and fewer working days lost due to dental problems.

Improvements in oral health could ultimately lead to a healthier, more productive workforce.

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