



THE CANADIAN DENTAL
HYGIENISTS ASSOCIATION
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE
DES HYGIÉNISTES DENTAIRES

Response to June 2 CBC story: Dentists Praise Canadian Dental Care Program

<https://www.cbc.ca/lite/story/1.7548661>

As the national voice of nearly 34,000 registered dental hygienists, the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) felt it was important to respond to Dr. Jerry Smith's quote in this article, suggesting that there is a shortage of dental hygienists. He specifically quoted a shortage of 5,500 dental hygienists in Ontario. Has this statistic been verified? In the absence of a verifiable source, CDHA questions the basis and validity of that figure. Similar sweeping statements such as “province-wide shortage of registered dental hygienists” and “deepening workforce crisis in oral health care” have been repeated recently by dentists and dental body spokespersons to the press; however, this narrative is not based on fact or grounded in high-quality evidence.

A lack of oral health human resource planning has resulted in an absence of high-quality data to support these statements of a shortage. Data does not exist about the comprehensive oral health needs of the Ontario population, nor the true availability of the oral health workforce. In the absence of this, it is difficult to determine the right skill mix of the oral health team (dental hygienists, dentists, dental assistants, denturists, dental technologists) and, therefore, the correct number of providers to meet the population's oral health needs. So, to say there is a province-wide shortage of registered dental hygienists is inaccurate. The narrative should be that there is a maldistribution of oral health professionals, and there may be shortages in specific regions of the country. Until we have robust workforce data for all levels of oral health professionals, we cannot make these generalizations.

Data from CDHA's [2023 Job Market and Employment survey](#) points to the potential for considerable turnover in the dental hygiene profession in the next five years. Nine percent (9%) of respondents reported planning to leave the profession within the next two years, while a further 18% plan to leave within three to five years. (Retirement is the most frequently cited reason for leaving the profession (64%), followed by seeking change of career (21%) and not feeling valued (18%)). However, data for those planning to leave the profession is just one data point. The number of new graduates entering the profession annually more than outweighs the number leaving the profession. In fact, many schools have increased their enrollments, and some new dental hygiene schools are adding to the population of dental hygienists. While some dental practices may have challenges recruiting staff, other underlying issues may have an impact. The fact is that in Ontario, according to the Ontario Dental Hygienists Association (ODHA) there are more dental hygienists in Ontario than ever before. Recently, a study commissioned by the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario (CDHO) shows a steady increase in the number of dental hygienists registered in Ontario over the past few years. The data published last month in BMC Oral Health shows Ontario having 97 RDHs per 100,000 population in 2023, which is substantially higher than

ratios in other provinces. The article is found on CDHO's website: <https://cdho.org/new-analysis-available-distribution-of-rdhs-in-ontario/>. The data does show there are regional variations.

Another fact not taken into consideration in this statement is that for over thirty years, dental hygienists in Ontario have not had to work under the supervision of a dentist in a dental practice. There are thousands of dental hygienists practising independently across Canada in traditional storefront independent dental hygiene practices, long-term care homes, and mobile practices, ensuring greater access to care for patients.

In addition, CDHA conducted a study in 2023 to understand the practice environment of dental hygienists. Data from the [2023 Healthy and Respectful Workplace survey](#) shows that 6 out of 10 respondents either personally experienced or have witnessed some form of mistreatment in the dental office, including abuse, bullying, violence, or harassment in the past 12 months. Thirty-nine percent considered quitting their job, and 14% did quit. This suggests a retention issue. Dental hygienists are experiencing many other workplace challenges, such as pressure to prioritize production over patient care, limited access to essential equipment, including PPE, a non-ergonomic environment, lack of fair compensation and benefits, etc. These conditions create undesirable workplaces that contribute to burnout and increase the desire to leave the profession, cut their hours, or search for non-clinical employment. These are issues that need to be addressed by practice owners. A more collaborative approach to oral health care could go a long way in solving some issues experienced by dental offices.

What is really needed are more positive and respectful work environments for Canada's dental hygienists that value their contribution as an essential member of the oral health team, respect their expertise in the area of prevention and therapeutic services, provide appropriate compensation and benefits, and allow them to practise to their full scope of practice. What we also need is a comprehensive needs-based oral health human resources model that can capture accurate data about the number of oral health providers needed now and in the future. CDHA, the Canadian Dental Association, and the Canadian Dental Assistants Association, in collaboration with a research team, have put together a proposal to obtain funding to create this robust and inclusive workforce planning and modelling structure for oral health professionals, and we are awaiting a response to start work on this very critical initiative. Until we have that data, cries about a "province-wide shortage" of registered dental hygienists are simply not supported by fact.