

Introductory Remarks

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The House of Commons' Standing Committee on Health

Children's Health

September 22, 2022

Ottawa, Ontario

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Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Bon matin à tous les membres du comité.

Before beginning my remarks, I would like to take a moment to recognize that I am joining you here today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg People.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to study such an important topic as Children's Health, and I appreciate your invitation to the Canadian Dental Association to participate in this morning's meeting.

At the Canadian Dental Association, we know that oral health is an essential component of overall health, and we believe that Canadians have a right to good oral health. That is why we fully support efforts by all levels of government to improve Canadians' oral health and to enhance their access to dental care.

Poor oral health strains other parts of the healthcare system, whether through hospital visits for dental emergencies, or managing the long-term impacts of poor oral health on systemic disease. This is particularly the case with children, as good childhood oral health serves as a foundation for the rest of a person's lifetime.

Unfortunately, despite significant progress over past decades, tooth decay remains the most common, yet preventable, childhood chronic disease in Canada. It is the most common reason for Canadian children to undergo day surgery, and it is a leading cause of why children miss school. Beyond the risk of pain and infection, tooth decay - particularly in young children - can impact eating, sleep, and proper growth; tooth loss and malocclusion; and increase the need for dental treatment later in life.

On a personal level, having been in private practice for 35 years, I can testify that nothing is more heart wrenching than having to treat a young child with severe dental decay. This often requires treatment under general anaesthesia in a surgical facility, which may involve lengthy wait times. In addition to the impact on the child's health, the experience can lead to long-term dental fear and anxiety. Therefore, it is so important to ensure that Canadian parents can access dental care for their children within months of a child's first tooth erupting. Early exposure to good oral hygiene habits and preventative care can make a lifetime of difference for a person's mouth.

While Canada compares favourably to many other countries, too many people - including children - still do not receive the dental care they need. More than six million Canadians each year avoid visiting the dentist because of the cost; this is especially true for low-income families. While every province and territory in Canada has a publicly funded dental program for children, these vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, leaving significant gaps.

This is why CDA welcomed the federal government's commitment earlier this year of a multi-billion-dollar, ongoing investment in enhancing Canadians' access to oral health. It comes after years of CDA encouraging federal investments in dental care. All those who have advocated on this issue in the past, whether on behalf of CDA, provincial and territorial dental associations, or other oral health organizations, should be proud that their hard work has led to this once-in-a-generation opportunity.

In particular, CDA appreciates the phased approach being taken by the federal government, illustrated by last week's announcement of a proposed *Canada Dental Benefit* and this week's introduction of legislation to implement the proposal. This will allow time to consult and collaborate with all relevant stakeholders on a long-term solution that is a well-informed, targeted, comprehensive and effective approach to improving access to oral healthcare. We appreciate that this interim measure balances supporting the oral health needs of Canadian children with several key priorities for Canada's dentists.

We have also appreciated the close collaboration demonstrated so far by Minister Duclos and his team at Health Canada and look forward to working with him in the months ahead. I would also like to thank Mr. Davies for his advocacy for oral health over the past number of years, which has culminated in this historic federal investment in enhancing access to dental care for Canadians.

Finally, beyond reducing financial barriers to accessing dental care, there are several other items CDA has focused on in its written brief to the committee. These include recommendations that the federal government:

- implement the remaining measures from Canada's Healthy Eating Strategy, with a focus on restrictions on food and beverage marketing to children under age 13;
- review its programs providing funding for drinking water systems and look for ways to support enhanced access to community water fluoridation;
- examine the administration of the Non-Insured Health Benefits program for First Nations and Inuit to ensure timely access to surgical facilities for children requiring dental treatment under general anaesthesia.

As well, we believe that it is essential for the federal government to include oral health as a component in any studies of the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to participate in today's meeting. I would be happy, alongside CDA's CEO Dr. Aaron Burry, to answer any questions you may have.