

Introductory Remarks

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The Senate Standing Committee on National Finance

The subject matter of Bill C-31

An Act respecting cost of living relief measures related to dental care and rental housing

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Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Bonsoir aux Sénateurs, Sénatrices, et aux autres témoins.

As I begin, would like to recognize that I am joining you today from the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Anishinabek Nations, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

Thank you for inviting the Canadian Dental Association to one of your first meetings studying bill C-31, which would implement the *Canada Dental Benefit*. I also appreciate having the opportunity to meet with many members of the Senate over the past week and I look forward to continuing to engage with you in the weeks and months to come.

At CDA, 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 impact 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 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 is a leading cause of why children miss school. Beyond the risk of pain and infection, tooth decay can impact eating, sleep, and proper growth; tooth loss and malocclusion; and increase the need for dental treatment later in life.

Having been in private practice for 35 years, I can testify that nothing is more heart wrenching than seeing a 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 important to ensure that Canadian parents can access dental care for their children within months of a child's first tooth erupting. Early detection of susceptibility to dental decay and 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; particularly those in low income families. While every province and territory in Canada has some

sort of publicly funded dental program for children, these vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, leaving significant gaps.

We therefore welcomed the government's commitment earlier this year of a significant, ongoing investment in dental care. CDA also appreciates the government's phased in approach to this initiative.

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 dental care. This includes continuing to work with provincial and territorial governments on the interactions between federal proposals and existing dental programming. CDA also appreciates the close collaboration demonstrated so far by Minister Duclos and Health Canada, and we look forward to working with them as they develop their long term approach.

In the coming months, the government, CDA, and other oral health organizations must work together to promote awareness of the *Canada Dental Benefit* and to educate families on the importance of using the benefit to take care of their children's oral health needs. Dentists and other front-line oral health providers will be the key touchpoint with patients as this benefit, and future proposals, are rolled out. In our recent submission to the House of Commons Finance committee, we recommended that the government provide financial support to oral health organizations over the next several years for activities such as public awareness, patient education, and member support.

Finally, I would like to very briefly highlight a few other items which CDA has recommended should be addressed in the context of enhancing access to dental care and improving Canadians' oral health. They are:

- Improving the NIHB program and Indigenous oral health outcomes;
- Better supporting oral health data collection and research by regularly including oral health as part of federal health surveys;
- Advancing the Health Eating strategy and incentivizing community water fluoridation; and
- Addressing ongoing shortages of dental office staff and other workforce challenges.

Thank you once again for inviting us to testify today. I would be happy, alongside CDA's CEO Dr. Aaron Burry, to answer any questions you may have.