



DENTAL ASSISTING WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

Dental assistants are the glue that hold dental offices together. The last time you went to the dentist, the person who placed the rubber dams, took x-rays, and walked you through your treatment plan or after care instructions was likely a dental assistant. Beyond ensuring the smooth operation of a dental office, they provide a crucial “second set of hands” to dentists during most dental procedures, from fillings to extractions to root canals.

Today, the majority of dental assistants across the country are Certified Dental Assistants. They’ve completed college-level training, passed a national examination, and – in most provinces – must be registered with, or licensed by, a regulatory authority. In the draft revision to the federal government’s National Occupational Classification released in late 2021, Dental Assistants were classified for the first time as “skilled profession.”

The challenges dental offices face when recruiting and retaining dental assistants have been a long-standing concern of both dental assistants and dentists. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a looming shortage of dental assistants, which was an obstacle to meeting the oral health needs of Canadians. In 2019, 36% of dental offices had vacant dental assistant positions. Over the course of the last decade, the ratio of new certified dental assistants to new dentists entering the workforce has decreased by more than half, from more than 3:1 to almost 1:1.



CDA is a federation of Canada's provincial and territorial dental associations, representing over 21,000 practising dentists from coast to coast to coast.

The Canadian Dental Association (CDA) is the national voice for dentistry dedicated to the promotion of optimal oral health, an essential component of general health, and to the advancement and leadership of a unified profession.

For more information, contact:

Michel Breau
Head of Advocacy and
Governance
Canadian Dental Association
mbreau@cda-adc.ca
613-291-9553

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Due to ongoing advances in dental office technology, and enhanced infection control procedures, the need for certified dental assistants is higher than ever before. Dental offices are now facing difficult decisions, such as postponing appointments or shortening hours due to the lack of available dental assistants.

Factors that have influenced this shortage vary from province to province, but broadly include:

- lack of access to certified dental assisting programs at post-secondary institutions;
- adequate compensation and benefits in a competitive labour market;
- workplace concerns such as mental health and wellness, ergonomic strain, and flexible hours; and
- varying regulatory frameworks on a province-by-province basis.

In order to address these concerns, the Canadian Dental Association (CDA) has renewed its collaboration with the Canadian Dental Assistants' Association (CDAA) to address these workforce challenges. Together, both organizations have developed the *Building the Professional Dental Assisting Workforce of the Future* project that seeks to:

- provide training on mental health and wellness to dental office staff, as well as on human resources to dentists and office managers;
- develop an online certified dental assisting curriculum to improve access to dental assisting programs, particularly for those living in rural and remote areas, or who are already part of the untrained dental sector workforce; and
- develop long-term action plans on interprovincial labour mobility, and on integrating newcomers to Canada into the dental assisting workforce.



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