

THE NATIONAL VOICE FOR DENTISTRY

The Canadian Dental Association (CDA) is the national voice for dentistry in Canada, dedicated to the promotion of optimal oral health and to the advancement and leadership of the dental profession.

Founded in 1902, CDA is a federation of Canada's provincial and territorial dental associations, representing practising dentists from coast to coast to coast.

With over 21,000 licensed dentists working out of over 16,000 offices — most of them small businesses — dentistry represents a significant portion of Canada's health care sector. In 2019, \$16.4 billion was spent on addressing Canadians' dental care needs.

"Oral health is part of your overall health. With a healthy mouth you can eat, speak and smile in comfort, which helps you feel physically, socially and mentally well. A healthy mouth helps you enjoy life."

During this year's Days on the Hill, CDA representatives are hoping to discuss:

- The progress of women in dentistry, and the changing face of the dental workforce;
- The growing shortage of dental assistants and its impact on the delivery of care;
- The need for federal investments in dental care, specifically targeting existing provincial and territorial programs that provide access to care for those who need it most; and
- The importance of good oral health for those in long-term care facilities.



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WOMEN IN DENTISTRY — THE CHANGING DENTAL WORKFORCE

- Up until the 1970s, dentistry was traditionally a profession dominated by men, with women principally working in supporting roles, such as dental assistants or dental hygienists.
- This has shifted significantly over the past several decades. As of 2021, roughly 40% of dentists in Canada were women, and gender parity is expected by 2035.
- This is even higher among new immigrants to Canada, with 45% of dentists being women according to 2016 census data.
- Since 2010, the majority of students enrolled in dental schools in North America are now women.
- There is still progress to be made for the dental sector as a whole when it comes to breaking traditional gender stereotypes. For example, as of 2021, 98% of dental hygienists and 99% of dental assistants were women.



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Women in Dentistry — The Changing Dental Workforce

Highlights of key women in Canadian dentistry:

- **Emma Gaudreau Casgrain** trained as a dentist under her husband and graduated from the Dental College of the Province of Quebec (precursor to McGill Faculty of Dentistry), she became licensed in 1898 and was the first woman to practise dentistry in Quebec.
- C.L. (Caroline Louisa) **Josephine Wells** gained admission to the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario to be able to take over the practice of her husband. She graduated in 1893 and began practising in Ontario, later completing her doctorate in 1899.
- Over a century later, in 2008, **Dr. Deborah Stymiest** became the first woman to lead the Canadian Dental Association (CDA) as President, having previously served as President of the New Brunswick Dental Society and on the CDA Board of Directors.

CDA is proud to welcome two women leaders in dentistry as our President over the next two years:

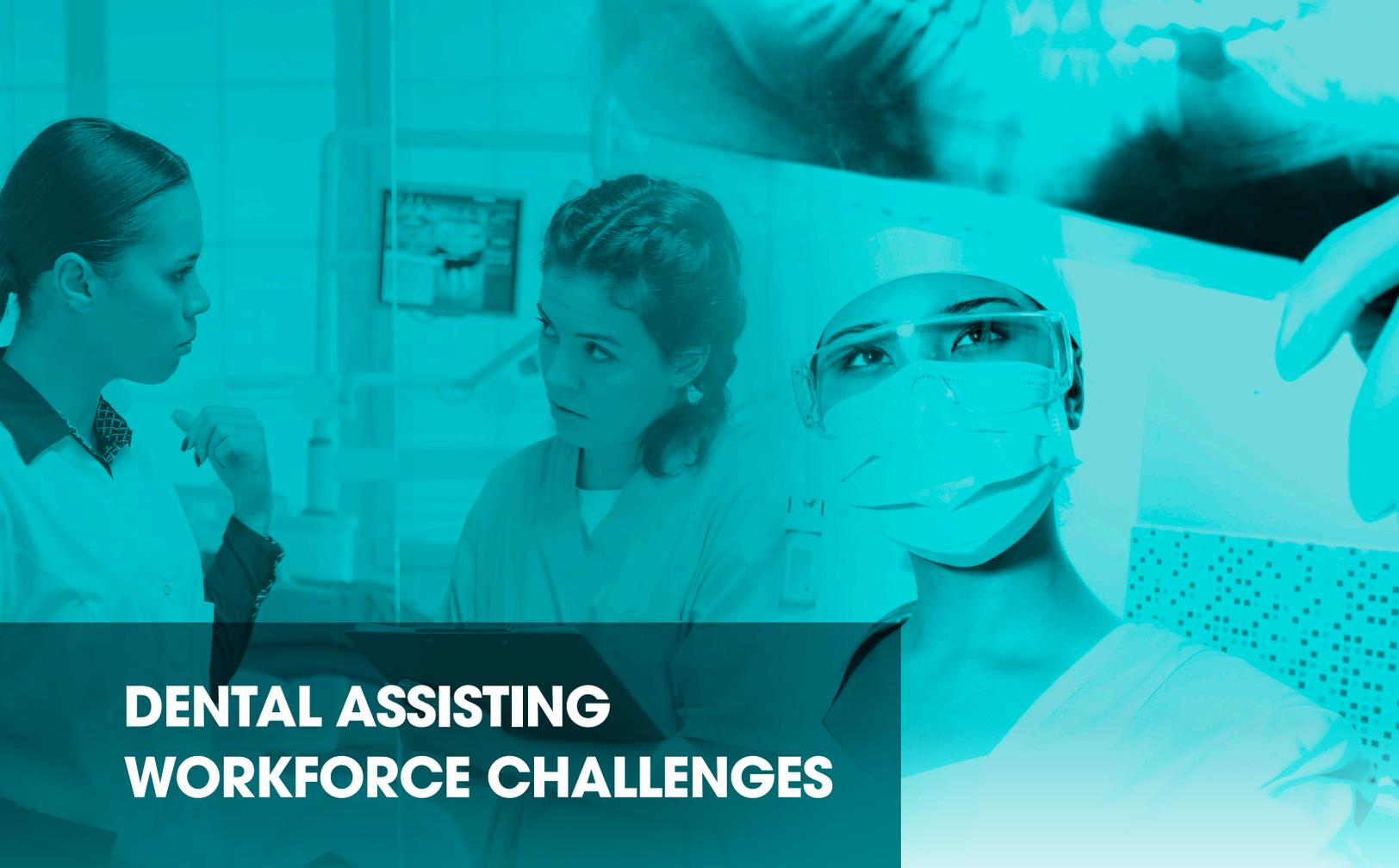
- **Dr. Lynn Tomkins**, of Toronto, recently became CDA's second female President, after previously serving as President of the Ontario Dental Association and on CDA's Board of Directors.
- She will be followed next year by **Dr. Heather Carr**, of Halifax, currently President-Elect of the CDA Board of Directors. She previously led the Nova Scotia Dental Association and served on the CDA Board.



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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.



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Dental Assisting Workforce Challenges

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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FEDERAL INVESTMENTS IN DENTAL CARE

State of Oral Health in Canada

Most Canadians are fortunate to enjoy good oral health. Roughly 75% of Canadians see a dentist on an annual basis, higher than comparable countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

Overall, approximately 67% of Canadians have dental benefits coverage to finance their dental care needs, in large part through employer-provided benefits. Additionally, 70% of those with employer-provided dental benefits indicated they would struggle to pay for their dental care needs if this coverage was disrupted.

Nevertheless, there is still work to be done to ensure that all Canadians can achieve and maintain good oral health, especially those in indigenous and rural communities. **That's why the Canadian Dental Association (CDA) has always supported efforts at all levels of government to improve the oral health of Canadians and increase access to dental care.**

Provincial and Territorial Programs

From coast to coast to coast, each of Canada's provinces and territories have existing infrastructure to support the oral health needs of their populations, particularly underserved communities and other groups such as children, seniors, persons living with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, racialized Canadians, and low-income families.

These programs vary across the country, posing unique challenges for access to care. For example:

- **Comprehensiveness:** Newfoundland has a universal access dental care program for all children aged 12 and under, but no dedicated program for seniors.
- **Coverage:** Although Quebec has a dental care program for all children under age 10, it doesn't cover preventative care such as cleanings, and restricts the type of filling material used in some circumstances, rather than allowing professional advice.



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Federal Investments in Dental Care

- **Cost:** In Ontario, programs reimburse less than 40% of fee guide levels for treatment, when the overhead costs of providing treatment increasingly exceeds 70%.
- **Cut-Offs:** Although Alberta has a dental care program for low-income adults, for single adults it is only available for those making less than \$16,580 annually – the equivalent of working roughly 20 hours per week at minimum wage.

In large part, many of these challenges exist because the programs are chronically underfunded – a result of them being almost exclusively financed by provincial and territorial governments.

Budget 2022 Investments in Dental Care

CDA welcomes the federal government's commitment, outlined in last month's 2022 budget, to invest \$5.3 billion over the next five years in providing access to dental care for Canadians. We look forward to collaborating closely with the federal government on ensuring these investments have maximum impact on the oral health of Canadians. For this reason, we strongly recommended that this funding flow through the existing program infrastructure at the provincial and territorial level.

It will be important to ensure that these new investments don't disrupt access to dental care for those Canadians who already have access – for example through provincial and territorial programs, or through employer-provided benefits.

Other Considerations

- **Prevention:** Beyond providing coverage for dental treatment, there are important preventative measures that can support the oral health needs of Canadians. This includes investing in public health systems and school-based dental programs that provide, for example, oral hygiene instruction, fluoride varnishes and rinses, and even sealants. Furthermore, community water fluoridation has long been recognized as a key measure to reduce dental decay, particularly among children. Unfortunately, Canada lags significantly behind the United States in the percentage of the population with access to fluoridated drinking water (73% in USA vs 45% in Canada).
- **First Nations and Inuit:** Nearly a million First Nations and Inuit are already eligible for dental coverage through the federal government's Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program. While the NIHB compares favourably to many existing provincial and territorial programs, the population it serves still faces both financial and other barriers in achieving and maintaining good oral health and accessing dental care. This is particularly true for those living in rural and remote communities, where socioeconomic and environmental conditions can contribute to poor oral health and accessing necessary dental care facilities can be difficult. In addition to investing in the oral health needs of the broader population, CDA also encourages the federal government to review what steps it can take to invest in First Nations and Inuit oral health.



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ORAL HEALTH IN LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES

Seniors in long-term facilities (LTC) face unique health challenges. Nothing has demonstrated this more than the experience over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Oral health is an essential component of overall health, and that's why the Canadian Dental Association (CDA) has long recommended that the following oral health standards be adopted by long-term care (LTC) facilities:

- An oral health assessment should be conducted by an appropriately trained and licensed health professional upon intake and annually thereafter;
- Beginning as soon as possible after admission, a referral process to a dentist for examination, diagnosis and treatment planning should take place;
- A daily oral health care plan should be implemented by appropriately trained staff;
- Facilities should contain suitable infrastructure to support the appropriate delivery of needed care by the oral health care team.

We are glad to see that the new, draft National Long-Term Care Standards released by Health Standards Organization contain references to oral health, including the importance of an oral health assessment on intake, and ensuring access to external dental care treatment providers.

We have recommended that these standards be further strengthened by adding standards relating to:

- Delivery of a daily preventative oral care plan by appropriately trained staff; and
- Ensuring facilities have the appropriate infrastructure, equipment, and tools to enable routine, basic dental treatment to be delivered on site.



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BUILDING THE PROFESSIONAL DENTAL ASSISTING WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

The Canadian Dental Association (CDA) has partnered with the Canadian Dental Assistants' Association (CDAA) to submit a project to Employment and Social Development Canada's Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program entitled *Building the Professional Dental Assisting Workforce of the Future*.

The project seeks to address the many factors impacting the recruitment and retention of dental assistants in their profession, ensuring that the dental assisting workforce can adequately support Canadians dental care needs going forward.

The project requests \$1.5 million in federal funding for the following activities:

1. Expand CDA's pilot project on mental health and wellness, developed from the Mental Health Commission of Canada's *The Working Mind* platform, and make it available to all dental office staff.
2. Develop and deliver human resources training for dentists and dental office managers.
3. Develop an online-based certified dental assisting curriculum, enabling broader access to certified dental assisting programs, particularly for those living in rural and remote areas and for those already working in dental offices.
4. Develop an action plan to improve interprovincial labour mobility for dental assistants.
5. Develop an action plan to better attract and train new immigrants to Canada as certified dental assistants.



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Building the Professional Dental Assisting Workforce of the Future

Our hope is that through this project we will see the following outcomes:

- a better workplace environment to deal with concerns such as stress and mental health;
- dental office staff members to gain the tools and knowledge necessary for employee recruitment and retention in a competitive labour market
- the sector will see an increase in Canada's capacity to train new certified dental assistants; and
- the sector will gain a better understanding on how to improve labour mobility for dental assistants and how to better integrate newcomers and other equity-deserving groups into the dental assisting work force



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