

Dental Assisting in Canada

Two studies reveal the issues impacting the profession across the country.

In 2020, *CDA Essentials*, (volume 7, issue 1, pages 10-12) published an article entitled “The Dental Assistant Workforce” which revealed the results of two surveys:

1. **One survey** conducted by the **CDA** asked dentists what they perceived as the issues facing the dental assisting profession in Canada.
2. **Second survey** conducted by the **Canadian Dental Assistants’ Association (CDAA)** with financial support from the CDA, surveyed dental assistants on factors, realities and experiences impacting their profession.

The **original CDA Essentials** article presented data from the **second study**, (which was a joint effort from CDAA and CDA) without the input, consultation or knowledge of the CDAA.

The role of the CDAA for the past 75 years is to advocate for the dental assisting profession and for our professional members across Canada. For this reason, it is important the CDAA be afforded the professional courtesy of providing additional context to a study which revealed the perspectives of Canadian dental assistants, beyond those that were presented in the original CDA Essentials article.

“The expectation that dental assistants must constantly be learning new skills, materials, equipment, etc. without receiving pay raises which reflect upgrades in skill level. Lowest paid and least respected position in the office yet most offices can’t run without the dental assistant.” (Factors, Realities and Experiences of Employment as a Dental Assistant in Canada, CDAA, 2019, p.59)

An accumulation of workplace concerns expressed by dental assistants to CDAA over a number of years lead the CDAA to question if Canadian dental assistants may be confronted with a systemic problem rather than individuals experiencing random workplace issues.

To answer these questions and others, in the fall of 2018 the CDAA launched a survey with the goal of collecting feedback on the scope of issues related to healthy and respectful workplaces and to gain a better understanding of the working environment of dental assistants. This national *Healthy and Respectful Workplace* survey revealed respondents had personally experienced some form of harassment, bullying, abuse and/or violent behavior over the course of their career from their employer (50%), from patients (~43%), from co-workers (42%) and from office managers (33%).¹ In addition, 9% of dental assistants reported having experienced sexual harassment in the workplace by dentists; 24% from patients.¹ Comparing CDAA’s findings with the Government of Canada’s study on harassment revealed women in health occupations experienced workplace harassment significantly more than women in all other occupations (with the exception of management and sales and service occupations) and **CDAA’s results more than doubled the national findings.**² Even more surprising, dental assisting respondents reported significantly higher instances of sexual harassment in the workplace than the reported national Canadian average (4%).²

“Long hours, no bathroom breaks, missed lunches. Not enough time being booked to properly serve patients. Dentists being verbally abusive. Patients complaining, they hate you.” (Factors, Realities and Experiences of Employment as a Dental Assistant in Canada, CDAA, 2019, p.59)

While CDAA was finalizing its *Healthy and Respectful Workplace* survey, the CDA brought forward anecdotal reports of a Canada-wide “shortage” of dental assistants. CDAA suspected negative workplace environments may be impeding retention of dental assistants due to the *Healthy and Respectful Workplace* survey responses of 35% reporting they had left their job and 61% reporting that they were considering leaving their jobs.¹ While the CDAA acknowledges there are dental practices across Canada experiencing difficulties finding and/or retaining staff, statistics from the Government of Canada’s employment projections revealed that over 2014-2016, employment growth for dental assisting was stronger than the average growth of all other Canadian occupations.³ In addition, key labour market indicators suggest that the number of job seekers is sufficient to fill the job openings. These labour market projections further reveal that for the period of 2017-2026, dental assisting in Canada is trending to a surplus environment with new job openings expected to total **9,200 across Canada**, and an anticipated **10,100** new job seekers available to fill them.³

The lack of data on Canadian dental assistants is acute. Historically, Canadian dental assistants are all but invisible in the published and grey literature.^{4,5} The lack of profession-specific data, disparity between labour market trend analysis and dentists’ perception of dental assistant shortages and the *Healthy and Respectful Workplace* survey results, indicated to CDAA a need to further explore factors which may be impacting the employment landscape of dental assisting in Canada. In the spring of 2019, with the financial support and in consultation with the CDA, CDAA launched the *Factors, Realities, Experiences of Employment of Dental Assistants in Canada or FREEDAC* study. In the original **CDA Essentials** article, the *FREEDAC* study was referred to as the “working conditions” study.

Canada’s frontline healthcare workforce, similar to many other countries, is dominated by dedicated, professional women. The Canadian Nurses Association noted in 2018 that 92% of nurses identify as female.⁶ With a feminized workforce numbering approximately 30,000,⁶ 99% of dental assistants responding to the *FREEDAC* study identified as female and while this result is not surprising, it does provide important contextual relevance: 2017 Canadian women earned 88.5 cents for each dollar earned by a man and the wage gap widens for immigrant women, Indigenous women, women of colour and women with disabilities.⁷ While the extent of the wage gap specific to the dental assisting profession was not examined in the *FREEDAC* study, over 38% of dental assistants did respond that they feel unfairly compensated for their contribution to the oral health team. This result suggests that future retention and recruitment practices need to be cognizant of current wage equity challenges to ensure future compensation does not widen or contribute to the existing wage gap. Without improvements to current compensation levels, dental assisting is at risk of losing a significant portion of its workforce and maintaining a sufficient workforce to address demand will not be possible.

The *FREEDAC* study results show the majority of dental assistants work full-time in private practice in a single location and also revealed 23% of dental assistants supplement their income as a dental assistant with income from outside the profession. With over one-third of survey participants reporting they are aware of a dental assisting job opening in their current practice, this finding suggests that dental assistants are supplementing their income because of low remuneration rather than lack of available work. While the majority of respondents do not supplement their income with work outside of the profession, this does not necessarily reflect satisfaction with current remuneration, but may indicate that they are unable to do so due to time constraints outside of paid employment.⁸

“I love dental assisting because you get a variety of everything. But when you can barely make ends meet you are forced to have to move up and do something else where you can make more.” (Factors, Realities and Experiences of Employment as a Dental Assistant in Canada, CDAA, 2019, p.64)

The previous *CDA Essentials* article noted that 42% of *FREEDAC* respondents were between the ages of 20-34. The article went on to claim that the age of these respondents “represents a large pool of the workforce that are likely to need parental leave. Studies indicate that a significant proportion of workers (especially women) with lower incomes that go on parental leave do not re-enter the workforce.” References for these “studies” was not provided in the article. This statement does not accurately reflect current labour force data. Between 1976 and 2015, the employment rate of women whose youngest child was under the age of 6 grew by 37.4 percentage points, from 32.1% to 69.5%; and the employment rate of women with children aged 6 to 11 grew by 33.1 percentage points, from 45.0% to 78.1%.⁹

“(they) may make excellent employees but husband’s hours, children, pregnancy may intrude” (Simpson, W.J. (1965). *Choosing a dental assistant*. Journal of the Canadian Dental Association, Vol. 31, No. 1, 17-21.)

The more concerning aspect of the reference to parental leave included in the previous *CDA Essentials* article is that it highlights the historic systemic discrimination of feminized professions such as dental assisting. This statement implies that the perceived “shortage” of dental assistants can be in-part attributed to dental assistants being female who, based on their anatomy, require leave due to pregnancy and/or parental leave. In addition, as far back as 2001, there is evidence female dentists faced similar barriers. In an article that appeared in the JCDA it was noted that dentistry at that time was faced with not enough graduates to meet future needs and that this was attributed in part to over 50% of dental graduates identifying as female, which would “lead to a dramatic increase in part-time dentists, as women have traditionally been inclined towards family and other non-dental interests.” And that this trend of feminizing dentistry would “cause vacancies on a full- and part-time basis.”¹⁴ Certainly, continuing to link the need (whether overtly or indirectly) for pregnancy, post-partum and/or parental leave to a lack of qualified dental assistants during their child-bearing years, highlights a need to change policies and accommodate dental assistants, instead of making exceptions to those that do not “fit” an image of an ideal employee.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) defines pregnancy-related harassment as negative comments about the impact of a woman’s impending maternity leave on the workplace, or the fact that she has been pregnant more than once while working at the same job.¹⁰ Further, the Supreme Court of Canada has defined systemic discrimination as practices or attitudes that have, whether by design or impact, the effect of limiting an individual’s or a group’s right to the opportunities generally available because of attributed rather than actual characteristics.¹¹ In employment, the culture in some sectors may not be designed to take into account employees’ needs related to caring for infants or young children. For example, a report on the retention of female lawyers in private practice, found these women are systemically disadvantaged in private practice, in part because having and caring for children conflicts with the structure of the profession. This led to a disproportionate number of women leaving the profession, compared to men. This report further noted that sectors that do not recognize these needs can effectively bar women from equal opportunities and advancement and can lead to them not entering or leaving the profession altogether.¹² The Royal Canadian Mounted Police also found similar barriers facing their female officers. The RCMP Gender and Respect Action Plan noted that **extended leave does not create frontline gaps, ineffective organizational management of it does.**¹³

“...dentist found out I was pregnant and took my shifts from 5 days a week to 1 day a week.” (Factors, Realities and Experiences of Employment as a Dental Assistant in Canada, CDAA, 2019, p.54)

The 1,927 dentists polled by CDA revealed that they believe the primary reasons dental assistants are leaving the profession are: for family responsibilities, to pursue a better offer and to relocate. However, data gathered from dental assistants in the *FREEDAC* and *Healthy and Respectful Workplace* studies revealed dentists' perceptions in this regard were inaccurate. Both studies found that dental assistants do not feel fairly compensated, they experience a severe lack of respect from dentists, they are leaving dentistry to apply their skills and education in other sectors, they cannot live or support their families on their existing salary, and they work in a stressful, mentally exhausting work environment. In addition, the *Healthy and Respectful Workplace* study revealed that dental assistants refrain from reporting mistreatment in the workplace because they are fearful of retaliation (71%), worry about the impact reporting will have on job security (68%) and fear their complaint won't be taken seriously (53%); these results suggest that the real reason dental assistants are leaving practice might be different from what they told dentists, as the results demonstrate they fear disclosing the mistreatment they have suffered at work.

The Government of Canada has noted that with regard to the dental assistant labour supply, the majority of job seekers will come from the school system. Statistics show we graduate more than enough licensed dental assistants; statistics from both the *Healthy and Respectful Workplace* survey and the *FREEDAC* study, also show a large percentage leave the profession due to workplace conditions. If we disregard the issues that contribute to dental assistants leaving the profession, there will never be enough qualified dental assistants to fill available positions regardless of how many we train. Accepting poor working conditions and compensation as "normal" in any occupation denies us the opportunity to create employment conditions that will lead to long term staff retention and efficient, well-staffed dental practices.

While the *FREEDAC* survey does not definitively show whether or not there is a dental assisting shortage, it does provide details on the many factors that impact the difficulty some employers are reporting with workforce retention and, possibly with future recruiting. Admittedly, the results of both the *FREEDAC* and the *Healthy and Respectful Workplace* studies are difficult to digest for both dental assistants and dentists, but if we are ever to have a meaningful, long-term, positive impact on the profession of dental assisting in Canada, the time has come to rip off the bandaid and face the issues in a real and honest way. Collaboratively, we must address these issues and move forward. There can be no looking back. For these reasons, the CDAA has approached the CDA to begin working collaboratively on addressing the findings of the *FREEDAC* report. It is CDAA's intention to develop an action plan that will improve workplace factors that are impacting the recruitment and retention of dental assistants. In addition, the CDAA will continue to collaborate with both the Canadian Dental Association (CDA) and Canadian Dental Hygienist Association (CDHA) as members of the tripartite working group, the *Healthy Workplace Working Group* (HWWG) to address the findings of the *Healthy and Respectful Workplace* survey.

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- ¹¹Moore, *supra* note 38, the Supreme Court of Canada reaffirmed its earlier definition of systemic discrimination set out in its seminal 1987 decision *Canadian National Railway Co. v. Canada (Human Rights Commission)*, [1987] 1 S.C.R. 1114 at p. 1138-1139
- ¹²Final Report – Retention of Women in Private Practice Working Group (2008), online: Law Society of Upper Canada, online. https://lawsocietyontario.azureedge.net/media/iso/media/legacy/pdf/c/convmay08_retention_of_women_executive_summary.pdf
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