



**CDAA Position Statement
on**

Oral Health Care Standards For Long-Term Care Facilities

The Canadian Dental Assistants Association (CDAA) supports the establishment of national oral health care standards for minimum oral health care for residents of long-term care (LTC) facilities to maintain and improve their oral health and consequently their general health. Further, the CDAA supports the establishment of a national accreditation system for LTC facilities to ensure compliance with those standards.

The CDAA support for oral health care for residents of long-term care facilities would include that the following standards be established and verified through a national accreditation system:

- * Require employment of professional Dental Assistants (DA) within the LTC system to do initial facility entry assessments, regular monitoring of oral health condition and to ensure provision of adequate daily oral care for residents. ***Ensure that the utilization of the full DA scope of practice be allowed in each jurisdiction as appropriate and required within the LTC setting.***
- * Require utilization of a nationally standardized Oral Health Assessment Tool to determine conditions requiring referral to a qualified oral health professional.
- * Ensure universal access for residents of long-term care facilities to annual (at minimum) dental examinations, and to appropriate oral health treatment as required to maintain oral health, which is provided by qualified oral health professionals.
- * Establish national standards for minimal dental equipment and space requirements in long-term care facilities to more appropriately enable the regular monitoring of oral health conditions for their residents by qualified oral health professionals.
- * Ensure the collaboration, coordination and sharing of information between medical practitioners, oral health practitioners and facility staff, in caring for residents in long-term care facilities.
- * Establish ongoing education programs (created through input from the full team of oral health professions) - for staff of LTC facilities, residents, and their families - to improve awareness and recognition of the pivotal role that oral health plays in overall general health and well-being.

Background

Health is influenced by many factors, which may generally be organized into five broad categories known as determinants of health: genetics, behavior, environmental and physical influences, medical care and social factors. These five categories are interconnected. **(1)**

As the linkages between oral health, overall well-being and quality of life continue to be shown through numerous studies and findings, so too has the identification of vulnerable groups from among Canada's population that face barriers to oral health care. Canada has identified one of these vulnerable groups to be the residents of long-term care facilities.

Studies have shown that oral health is generally poor among residents of long-term care facilities. This situation results from a combination of inadequate daily mouth care, limited access to a minimum of an annual dental examination and required professional dental care, inadequate facilities for the provision of dental treatment, compromised medical condition, and limited finances **(2)**. As well, residents face difficulty with brushing and flossing due to mobility issues, medications that can affect the production of saliva, and chronic diseases that lower immunity **(3)**.

With the aging Canadian population, the burden of illnesses and related diseases has the potential to increase health care costs and socioeconomic expenditures across the entire health care system **(3)**. According to the *Canadian Health Measures Survey, 2007-2009*, income is a strong determinant of health status and access to care. The *Survey* found that uninsured and low- to middle-income people, including older adults, tend to avoid dental visits because of the financial cost, despite many unresolved oral problems **(4)**.

In most jurisdictions across Canada, there is no process or funding in place for oral healthcare professionals to initially assess or monitor and maintain the oral health of LTC residents. Oral healthcare across our country is in most cases privately funded by individuals or through insurance programs provided by employers.

Ideally, governments would ensure funding to allow oral health professionals to provide for the oral health needs of our vulnerable seniors. Government employ of the professional Dental Assistant in LTC facilities would be the logical means of monitoring those needs, ensuring proper daily oral care and ongoing assessment for conditions that require referral to a dentist, dental hygienist or denturist. (see Competency List For RDAs In LTC **(5)**)

Benefits

'Oral diseases and conditions can have social impacts on quality of life, including comfort, eating, pain and appearance, and are related to dentate status... Older adults need to eat and talk comfortably, to feel happy with their appearance, to stay pain free, to maintain self-esteem, and to maintain habits/standards of hygiene and care that they have had throughout their lives' **(6)**.

Improved oral health will significantly affect a resident's quality of life in many ways:

- * Healthy appearance
- * Increased self-esteem and social interactions
- * Ability to eat well, maintain nutritional status and prevent weight loss
- * Reduced risk of: aspiration pneumonia; chronic infection and bacteraemia; cardiovascular disease; and fewer complications in management of systemic illnesses **(6)**.

From a financial perspective, it is beneficial to reduce the overall health costs related to poor oral health among LTC residents. Hospitalization for complications in managing systemic illness, acute and chronic infections, cardiovascular issues and other severe health conditions arising from oral inflammation and infections could be reduced significantly by focusing on maintaining good oral health among our vulnerable population of seniors.(7)

Conclusion

The CDAA believes that there is a societal responsibility to address the oral care needs of Canadians, regardless of where they reside and that all Canadians should have equal access to oral health care without regard to their age, socioeconomic status or the nature of individual needs.

The CDAA strongly encourages the participation of oral health practitioners in a leadership capacity in lobbying provincial and federal governments to support and fund scientific research that evaluates the link between oral health and overall health.

The CDAA strongly encourages governments to act quickly to establish national oral health care standards for minimum oral health care for residents of long-term care (LTC) facilities to maintain and improve their oral health and consequently their general health. Further, the CDAA strongly encourages the establishment of a national accreditation system for LTC facilities to ensure compliance with those standards.

Bibliography and References

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