



Nova Scotia Dental Association

2024

# NOVA SCOTIA ORAL HEALTH REPORT

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION:

SOLVING NOVA SCOTIA'S DENTAL STAFF SHORTAGE WILL BENEFIT PATIENTS



# Preventative dental care is the most important step you can take for a lifetime of good oral health.

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In addition to daily brushing and flossing, this includes regular checkups at the dental office. Unfortunately, Nova Scotia has a critical shortage of registered dental assistants and registered dental hygienists, making access to dental care difficult for many people in the province.

Having timely access to a complete oral health team is essential for good oral health. A complete oral health team provides comprehensive care and helps patients establish a routine of proper hygiene practices. They stop potential dental problems in their tracks, thwarting the onset of gum disease and tooth decay, and can prevent minor problems from becoming major health issues. Dentists can even spot signs of oral cancer!



With a new federal dental plan on the horizon leading to new patients in the system, the issue of longer wait times for this crucial care will only worsen without action on the acute shortage of dental office staff.

# WHAT'S THE IMPACT OF A DENTAL STAFF SHORTAGE?

Dental offices cannot efficiently operate without a full team, which includes registered dental assistants and registered dental hygienists.

**These professionals provide a range of services within the dental clinic, including:**

- Conducting patient screenings and oral health assessments, including taking vital signs and documenting patient medical and health history
- Taking dental impressions
- Taking and developing X-rays
- Performing patient procedures, such as teeth cleaning and fluoride and sealant applications

Without sufficient dental office staff, patients may experience longer wait times for routine checkups and other services, which increases the risk of minor dental issues going unnoticed/untreated and developing into significant health problems that are expensive to fix. This can force patients into emergency room visits, adding pressure to an already strained healthcare system.

**Staff shortages at dental clinics across Canada have led to a reduction in available appointments. Over a two-month period in 2023, an estimated 500,000 adult Canadians had a dental appointment cancelled due to staffing availability issues. This adds up to three million cancellations throughout the year, or approximately 120 per dentist.<sup>2</sup>**

# WHY IS THERE A SHORTAGE?

The dental profession saw many registered dental hygienists and registered dental assistants exit the industry amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, citing mental health challenges and burnout. Added to this are the increasing numbers of new dentists in Canada, outpacing the growth of new registered dental assistants and registered dental hygienists. Between 2010 and 2019, the national ratio of new registered dental assistants to new dentists dropped from 3.21 to 1.74.<sup>5</sup> These factors have led to workforce shortages and capacity issues that have been years in the making.<sup>2</sup>

**In the face of this pressure, the industry is seeing high attrition rates, too. In a 2023 survey of Canadian dental hygienists:<sup>2</sup>**

- 10% plan to leave the profession within the next two years; and
- 18% plan to leave within three to five years.

**Additionally, for registered dental assistants:<sup>2</sup>**

- 31% say there is not enough staff to complete work;
- 53% reported having too much work to complete all their assigned tasks well;
- 62% feel anxious in the workplace all or most of the time;
- 25% plan to seek a new job within the next year; and
- 10% are currently unemployed due to mental health concerns.



**Nearly 20% (1 in 5) of Nova Scotians are waiting longer for a dental hygiene appointment as compared to a year ago<sup>3</sup>**

## HOW DOES CDCP FACTOR IN?

Dental care under the federal Canadian Dental Care Plan (CDCP) is expected to begin in spring 2024, with coverage rolling out in stages based on age groups. Once fully implemented in 2025, the CDCP will help ease financial barriers to accessing oral health care for up to nine million Canadians.<sup>6</sup>

While the CDCP is a historic investment for Canada's healthcare system, its rollout may significantly disrupt access to dental care. When it comes to Nova Scotia's CDCP-related worries, research has shown that increased wait times for dental appointments and a lack of registered dental assistants both rank high.<sup>7</sup>

Dentists have the choice to opt in or opt out of participation in the CDCP. Due in part to existing staff shortages, dental office participation across Canada is expected to be low as the plan is implemented.

**In a 2022 Census Survey of dentists, 50% of Nova Scotia dentists reported having to cancel at least one patient appointment a month due to unavailability of staff. For the month of the survey alone, this equated to 1,600 cancelled dental appointments in Nova Scotia.<sup>4</sup>**



# DENTISTRY'S RECOMMENDATIONS

To help address dental office capacity issues, the Nova Scotia Dental Association wants to collaborate with government and educators to advance and promote dental hygiene and assisting career opportunities.

## This includes recommending:

- **Establishing student loan forgiveness programs for registered dental hygienists and registered dental assistants.** This initiative would ease the financial burden experienced by these professionals once they enter the workforce and encourage enrollment from Nova Scotians looking to start second careers.
- **Launching a wage support program to assist employers.** Compensation is a big part of retaining in-demand employees, and dental employers are feeling the crunch. A dental staff-focused wage enhancement program, similar to the existing WSP-ECE,<sup>8</sup> would be a good start.
- **Developing additional dental training programs across Nova Scotia and increasing the capacity of current programs.** This expansion would allow more individuals to pursue dental studies on their own schedule, and help fill job vacancies at dental clinics across the province.



# WHY CHOOSE A CAREER IN ORAL HEALTH?



## IN-DEMAND SKILLS:

- The unemployment rate for registered dental hygienists sits at 1% — far below the current Canadian unemployment rate of 5.2%<sup>9</sup>
- Demand for registered dental assistants and registered dental hygienists is robust in Nova Scotia, and employment opportunities exist in both rural and urban areas<sup>10,11</sup>

## REWARDING WORK:

- Registered dental assistants and registered dental hygienists provide critical services in dental practices and also help Nova Scotians lead healthier lives by educating the public on good oral health practices and promoting good dental health

## JOB FLEXIBILITY:

- Registered dental assistants and registered dental hygienists can seek full-time, part-time, or locum positions
- Clinics located in regions across Nova Scotia are looking to hire new team members to help accommodate growing patient demand<sup>10,11</sup>



Nova Scotia Dental Association

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Oral Health Complications, Canadian Dental Association: [https://www.cda-adc.ca/en/oral\\_health/talk/complications](https://www.cda-adc.ca/en/oral_health/talk/complications)
- <sup>2</sup> Environmental Scanning Report (March 2023), Canadian Dental Association.
- <sup>3</sup> Narrative Research, The Atlantic Quarterly® Spring 2024 (NSDA Commissioned Questions), Feb. 2024.
- <sup>4</sup> Impact Economic Consultants NSDA Census Survey (2022).
- <sup>5</sup> Canadian Dental Association, New Certified Dental Assistants by Year – Data by NDAEB (2018).
- <sup>6</sup> The Canadian Dental Care Plan (11 December 2023), Health Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/news/2023/12/the-canadian-dental-care-plan.html>
- <sup>7</sup> DIGITAL360 | Public Affairs Nova Scotia Dental Association (January 2024), NordSpark.
- <sup>8</sup> Wage Support Program for Early Childhood Educators (WSP-ECE), New Brunswick: [https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/services/services\\_renderer.201536.Wage\\_Support\\_Program\\_for\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Educators\\_\(WSP-ECE\).html](https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/services/services_renderer.201536.Wage_Support_Program_for_Early_Childhood_Educators_(WSP-ECE).html)
- <sup>9</sup> Findings from the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) 2023 Job Market and Employment Survey: [https://www.cdha.ca/cdha/Career\\_folder/Job\\_Market\\_\\_\\_Employment\\_Survey/2023\\_Job\\_Market\\_\\_\\_Employment\\_Survey/CDHA/Career/Survey/2023\\_Job\\_Market\\_Survey.aspx](https://www.cdha.ca/cdha/Career_folder/Job_Market___Employment_Survey/2023_Job_Market___Employment_Survey/CDHA/Career/Survey/2023_Job_Market_Survey.aspx)
- <sup>10</sup> Government of Nova Scotia — Dental Assistant: <https://explorecareers.novascotia.ca/occupation/173>
- <sup>11</sup> Government of Nova Scotia — Dental Hygienists and Dental Therapists: <https://explorecareers.novascotia.ca/occupation/165>