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Oral Health Strategy urgently needed in Ontario, expert review by College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario finds

An estimated three million Ontario adults have not seen an oral health professional in more than a year

TORONTO – As many as three million Ontario adults have not seen an oral health professional in more than a year, highlighting an urgent and growing need for a provincial oral health strategy, according to a *Review of Oral Health Services in Ontario* released today by the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario (CDHO).

“The good news is that more than 75 per cent of the people living in Ontario are receiving high-quality oral healthcare services. The bad news is that a significant number of Ontarians have limited or no access to necessary oral healthcare services,” CDHO President Mike Connor said.

Some of Ontario’s most vulnerable populations – children in single parent families, aboriginal and rural populations, and low-income families – are most affected by lack of access to oral health services, the expert review found. Access will become more challenging as the population ages and seniors retire without the benefit of private dental insurance.

“The review identified an opportunity for oral health, public health, and primary care practitioners to work together to develop a strategy to provide the access that the people of Ontario need,” Connor said.

Connor said that poor oral health is increasingly being associated with diseases such as diabetes and pneumonia and can result in low self-esteem, fewer employment opportunities and higher rates of poverty. He noted that the CDHO commissioned the review as part of its public safety mandate in the delivery of oral health services.

“Our hope with this review is to start a much-needed discussion on this issue. We believe that discussion should include all oral health professionals who play a critical role in delivering oral health services,” Connor said.

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The review team was led by Barry Monaghan, who has held executive leadership positions at hospitals and Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) as well as the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Tom Closson, former president and CEO of the Ontario Hospital Association; and Steven Lewis, Adjunct Professor of Health Policy at the University of Calgary, were secondary reviewers. The review included interviews with more than 50 leaders in oral health, public health, dentistry, regulatory colleges and other healthcare professionals and organizations. The review team also conducted focus groups, and reviewed literature, current oral health programs, scope of practice, and relevant legislation in Ontario.

The review found there is no common vision, direction or overall provincial strategy for the delivery of timely, accessible and cost-effective oral health services. Instead, the delivery of services and the leadership in the oral health sector is fragmented in Ontario. As well, the review found that various oral health provider groups do not have a history of collaborating well together on moving towards an effective oral health system.

The review identified six opportunities for the oral health sector to consider collectively, including having Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) recognize oral health services as an important component of the overall health system, conducting more research on this issue and increasing public awareness of the importance of oral health, particularly among disadvantaged populations.

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Read the Report and the Report's Executive summary at www.cdho.org

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