

## Clarifying the narrative around the “shortage” of registered dental hygienists in Ontario

There is a figure circulating about a severe shortage of registered dental hygienists (RDHs) in Ontario. Some people quote as high as 5,500 more dental hygienists are needed to meet the oral health needs in the province.

What is unfortunate about this narrative is that it is not based on fact!

Statements such as “province-wide shortage of registered dental hygienists” and “deepening workforce crisis in oral health care” are not grounded in high-quality evidence.

- The lack of oral health human resource planning has resulted in an absence of high-quality data to support these statements of a shortage.
- Data does not exist about the comprehensive oral health needs of the Ontario population. In the absence of this, it is difficult to determine the right skill mix of the oral health team (RDHs, dentists, dental assistants, denturists, dental technologists) and, therefore, the correct number of providers to meet the population’s oral health needs.
- To say there is a province-wide shortage of registered dental hygienists is inaccurate. While some dental practices may have challenges recruiting staff, ODHA’s work to understand the practice environment for RDHs suggests this is more due to challenges dental hygienists experience, such as harassment, pressure to prioritize production over patient care, limited access to essential equipment including PPE, and lack of benefits, etc. These conditions create undesirable workplaces contributing to burnout and increasing the desire to leave the profession.

The fact is there are more dental hygienists in Ontario than ever before. Registration data from the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario (CDHO) show a steady increase over the past few years in the number of dental hygienists registered in Ontario.

Research published last month in BMC Oral Health shows Ontario had 97 RDHs per 100,000 population in 2023, substantially higher than other provinces. The article is found on CDHO’s website: <https://cdho.org/new-analysis-available-distribution-of-rdhs-in-ontario/>. The data shows there are regional variations, and we do need to dive deeper to understand the impact of those on access to care.

I am pleased to see an increasing number of applicants writing the national certification exam for dental hygiene. ODHA’s data from our salary and practice surveys over the past ten years shows more and more RDHs are practising full-time.

Again, and I cannot stress this enough - what we do not know is the appropriate skill mix and number required of each member of the oral health team to meet the population’s oral health needs.

I would love to see a comprehensive needs-based oral health human resources model that can capture high-quality data about the number of oral health providers needed now and in the future. Until we have that, cries about a “province-wide shortage” of registered dental hygienists are not fact-based.

In the meantime, let’s work together to create positive and respectful work environments for Ontario’s RDHs that pay appropriate wages, provide comprehensive benefits, and allow them to practise to their full education and expertise.

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