



Canadian Association of Public Health Dentistry  
Association canadienne de la santé dentaire publique

# ROADMAP TO UNIVERSAL

# Dental Care

# IN CANADA

SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS  
STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

DATE: SEPTEMBER 9, 2020

## Introduction

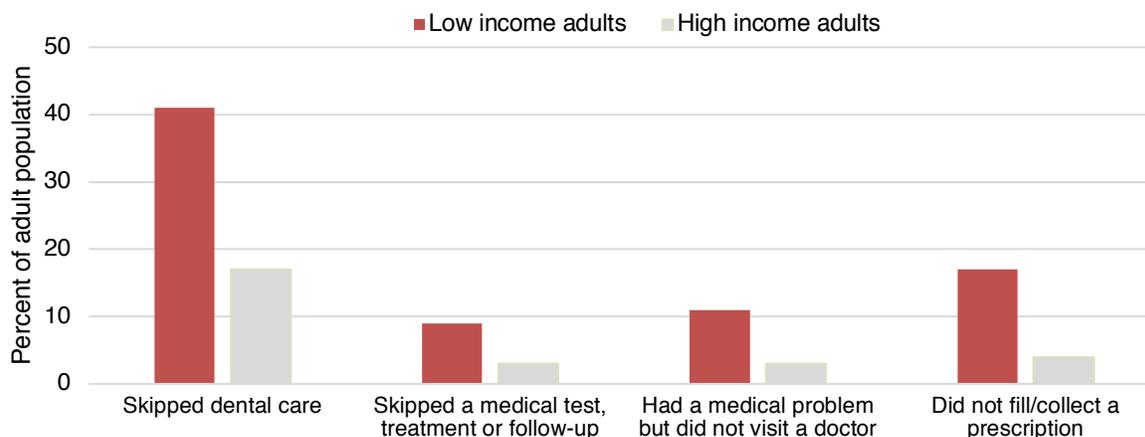
Dental care largely falls outside of the *Canada Health Act*, with only 5-6% of dental care in Canada being publicly funded.<sup>1,2</sup> The majority of Canadians rely on employer-sponsored dental benefits (62%) or out-of-pocket payments (32%) to access dental care. Employer-sponsored dental benefits can change or be lost based on employment status (i.e. full-time, part-time or contract employee), with reimbursement amounts and the procedures covered often based on negotiated agreements rather than actual dental needs.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, over time, employers and benefit carriers have reduced the scope of services covered under dental plans and have increased premiums, co-payments and deductibles.<sup>4-8</sup>

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Health, herein referred to as the 'Committee on Health,' studies and prepares recommendations for the federal government on topics relating to health. In December 2019, the Throne Speech encouraged parliament to explore the idea of universal dental care and supported Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau's mandate to work with parliament to study and analyze the possibility of national dental care.<sup>9</sup> In that same year, Canada took part in the Political Declaration on Universal Health Coverage adopted at the United National General Assembly, which included oral health.<sup>10</sup> The CAPHD supports these initiatives and encourages the Committee on Health to explore ways to improve access to dental care for all Canadians.

## The problem: 1 in 5 Canadians report a cost barrier to dental care

Cost is one of the largest barriers to accessing dental care. According to the 2016 Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Survey, approximately 28% of Canadians skipped dental care in the past year due to cost.<sup>11</sup> Cost barriers were substantially higher for lower income (41%) than higher income adults (17%) and, when compared to other health care services, cost-barriers to dental care were the highest.<sup>11</sup> Globally, Canada ranks second last among eleven high income earning countries in reporting cost barriers to dental care.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 1. Cost-barriers to seeking health services in the past year among Canadians.<sup>11</sup>**



Access to appropriate dental care is a crucial determinant of oral health; however, not all Canadians have the same level of access.<sup>12,13</sup> There is sufficient evidence that people of lower socioeconomic status, immigrants, Indigenous populations, the working poor, and the elderly make fewer visits to the dentist than those of higher social and economic status.<sup>1,12,14-17</sup>

There are some publicly funded programs that address gaps in access to oral health care for specific populations; however, most focus on children from low-income families and adults experiencing significant social and economic marginalization. There is also unnecessary variation in publicly funded programs by province and territory based on population groups and available services.<sup>18,19</sup> Such a patchwork leaves out many who need access to dental care and who would benefit from dental care coverage.

### **The impact: poor access to dental care can impact health, the health care system, and the economy**

Poor access to dental care has significant impacts on individual health and wellbeing, the health care system, and the economy. Dental problems can pose barriers to academic achievement in children,<sup>20,21</sup> employment in adults,<sup>21,22</sup> and can impact workplace productivity.<sup>23,24</sup>

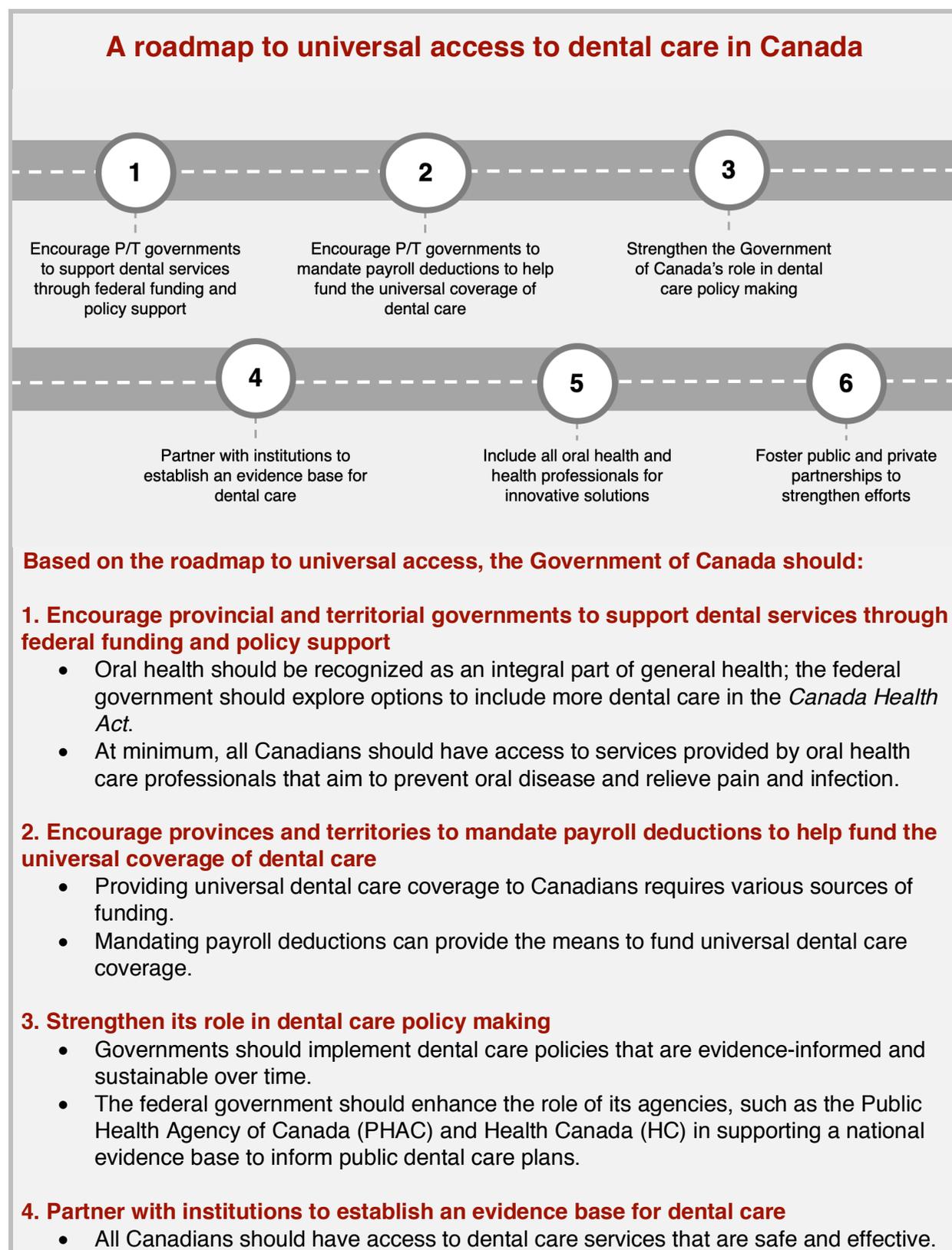
Most dental problems are largely preventable and lead to health consequences if left untreated. Good oral health is essential to overall wellbeing and is an inextricable part of an individual's quality of life. Oral health shares the same social, economic and cultural determinants with that of other chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease. Yet, the current approach to funding dental care leaves millions of Canadians unable to access dental care.<sup>25</sup>

Thousands of Canadians visit their family doctor or hospital emergency departments as a last resort to resolving dental problems.<sup>26-30</sup> However, these care pathways do not fully address dental problems nor are they equipped at preventing dental problems in the first place. Further, unnecessary prescribing of antibiotics or pain killers for toothaches in these settings can contribute to unintended societal harms, such as those associated with the opioid crisis or antimicrobial resistance.<sup>31-33</sup>

### **The solution: a roadmap to the universal coverage of dental care in Canada**

To maximize the oral health and access to dental care of Canadians, and to reduce unfair and avoidable differences in these outcomes, a greater commitment is required from governments, oral health professional organizations, and other institutions.

The CAPHD believes that the federal government can help Canada achieve the universal coverage of dental care through a unique and multi-faceted approach. The universal coverage of dental care is desirable, as it can result in cost-savings for governments and a fairer and more productive society.<sup>34</sup> Below we outline mechanisms to fund and initiate universal dental care coverage in Canada, and describe how institutions and workforce strategies can buttress and strengthen this approach. These recommendations were guided by the principles of prevention, equity, efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability.



- Partnering with academic institutions and government agencies, such as the Canadian Agency for Drugs & Technologies in Health (CADTH), can support efforts to identify safe, effective, and cost-effective dental services.

#### **5. Include all oral health and health care professionals for innovative solutions**

- General dentists, dental specialists, dental hygienists, dental therapists, denturists, and dental assistants alongside physicians, nurses, and pharmacists can all play a unique role in preventing dental problems and improving the oral health status of Canadians.
- A plan for the universal coverage of dental care should be flexible in order to meet the needs of all Canadians; this includes allowing for the delivery of dental care services across a variety of settings that match the needs of specific groups and the skillsets of all health care professionals.
- Initiatives are needed that integrate oral health care professionals within primary health care and other settings (e.g. long-term care, hospitals).
- Reinstating dental training programs, such as dental therapy, should be considered in order to diversify and rebuild Canada's oral health care workforce to maximum capacity.

#### **6. Foster public and private partnerships to strengthen efforts**

- Dental care can be funded by individuals, employers, and governments, can be administered by governments, non-profit and for-profit organizations, and delivered in both public and private settings, making accessibility more equitable for all Canadians.
- Care needs to be exercised to ensure all partners adhere to high standards of accountability and probity in the administration of public and private funds.

## **Summary**

- Lack of access to dental care affects millions of Canadians.
- It is important to ensure that all Canadians receive the dental care they need to be pain free and maintain their quality of life.
- The universal coverage of dental care can result in cost-savings for Canadian governments and a more productive society overall.
- The CAPHD encourage the Standing Committee on Health to study and analyze the possibility of universal dental care coverage in order to understand what role the federal government can play in increasing access to dental care for all Canadians.

Should you have any questions or wish to discuss further, please do not hesitate to contact Dr. Sonica Singhal, CAPHD President at [info@caphd.ca](mailto:info@caphd.ca).

## **About the Canadian Association of Public Health Dentistry**

The Canadian Association of Public Health Dentistry (CAPHD) is committed to achieving equitable dental care for all Canadians. The CAPHD is the national voice for dental public health in Canada and exists to support members, government, institutions and agencies who are dedicated to improving oral health and assuring oral health equity for Canadians.

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