

**GOVERNMENT OF CANADA**  
**PRE-BUDGET ONLINE CONSULTATION 2016**

**“We want to talk about how best to help families struggling to make ends meet and how to make our communities thrive.”**

**1. In your opinion, how can we better support the middle class?**

Thriving, prosperous communities are healthy communities. Poor oral health can interfere with an individual’s ability to find employment, be productive while at work, and concentrate at school. Oral diseases and conditions are often chronic, painful, and disfiguring, and can disrupt eating, sleep, and growth patterns; they represent a huge economic and social burden of illness for middle class Canadians. An estimated 40 million work hours are lost annually due to dental problems and treatment.

Supporting preventive oral health care will contribute to sustained, increased productivity among middle class workers in Canada, since healthy people are more productive. Indeed, initiatives that promote oral health for the middle class should be top of mind when we think about building strong thriving communities. Further, the strongest middle class is a growing middle class. Providing increased access to preventive oral care to individuals from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds will help them to reach and grow the middle class.

**2. What infrastructure needs can best help grow the economy, protect our environment and meet your priorities locally?**

Health care infrastructure is a crucial and constantly evolving component of a growing economy fueled by healthy and productive workers. Outdated regulations and legislation have inhibited access to diagnostic, preventive, and therapeutic oral health care for many Canadians, resulting in significant negative health and financial consequences for Canadians and governments.

The federal government has committed to innovation. In order to better meet the oral health care needs and priorities of Canadians, particularly those living in rural and remote communities, dental hygienists need access to mobile equipment, such as hand-held X-ray devices. The fixed-arm X-ray equipment currently in use by Canada’s dental practices cannot be transported, which hinders the technology’s scope of use. In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration has already cleared two systems of hand-held dental X-ray devices for sale. Such technological developments mean that dental infrastructure no longer needs to be stationary, but Canadian regulations have yet to catch up. Without regulatory changes that would allow dental hygienists to take mobile equipment to isolated and vulnerable populations, Canadians will continue to suffer, and the costs of treating preventable diseases and conditions will continue to rise.

For this reason, we urge the federal government to commit to innovative infrastructure, economic growth, and local priorities by updating the Radiation Emitting Devices Regulations to permit the use of

hand-held dental X-ray devices. This change would support expanded services to those who cannot physically access a dental practice, including those in rural and remote communities, allowing them to be screened by mobile practitioners.

### **3. How can we create economic growth, protect the environment and meet local priorities while ensuring that the most vulnerable don't get left behind?**

Dental hygiene is the sixth largest regulated health profession in Canada and continues to grow. In fact, the profession has seen a 30% increase in numbers employed over the past six years alone. Yet dental hygienists remain poorly represented in rural and remote communities, despite the fact that outdated legislation requiring the supervision of dental hygienists by dentists has largely been replaced with legislation that permits dental hygienists to practise independently. Rural and remote communities have the greatest need for the preventive and therapeutic services provided by dental hygienists, but limited human resource capacity has contributed to worsening oral health outcomes.

Substantial employment opportunities exist for dental hygienists in rural, remote, and northern regions of the country, and especially in First Nations and Inuit communities. Canada already has a highly trained, motivated dental hygiene workforce to meet this need. By encouraging the establishment of dental hygiene practices in these communities, the federal government will ensure not only that First Nations oral health needs are addressed more effectively, but also that downstream costs for expensive and invasive dental treatments (which usually require travel to urban centres) are reduced. In addition, these communities will become more attractive for new business ventures offering employment opportunities for local citizens, thanks to better access to quality oral health services.

The federal government has taken steps to attract and retain other health professionals in these communities, but it has not extended similar programs to dental hygienists. Doctors, nurse practitioners, and nurses have a portion of their Canada Student Loans forgiven by the government to incentivize practice in underserved communities. The federal government should optimize health human resources in rural and remote communities by expanding loan forgiveness to dental hygienists. The government should also consider grants, scholarships, and bursaries in exchange for a 3- or 4-year return-of-service commitment, wage incentives, a guaranteed minimum income or tax credits for practising in remote areas. These incentives would encourage dental hygiene graduates to move to locations where jobs exist and their skills are needed most.

### **4. Finally, is the implementation of these new priorities and initiatives realistic? Will it help us grow the economy?**

The federal government has made a commitment to job creation, economic growth, and productivity in Canada. Oral health is fundamental to overall health, productivity, employment, and, ultimately, every Canadian's well-being. For this reason, all Canadians should have access to professional oral hygiene services, particularly vulnerable populations who experience greater burdens of disease and are the least likely to be able to pay out of pocket for oral health care.

Fortunately, the federal government can ensure equitable access to oral care with initiatives that are straightforward and realistic. Modest and targeted investments in existing programs and the expansion of tax supports to promote preventive approaches to care will improve the overall health of Canadians, while reducing costs incurred by the federal government and the public for treating largely preventable oral diseases. Dental hygienists urge the federal government to focus on bringing services to people, rather than bringing people to services. Prevention and productivity go hand in hand. It's time to take action on oral health care for the good of the economy and the Canadian population as a whole.