

Long-Term Care: Nursing & Oral Health

A Joint Issues Brief Between
Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of BC
and the BC Dental Hygienists' Association
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Key Principles

- Residents in long-term care have complex needs and require fulsome, team-based care from a variety of health care professionals to meet their multi-faceted and often evolving health requirements.
- Oral health is inseparable from overall health. British Columbians across all life stages, including residents in long-term care, have the right to accessible, quality, equitable, and comprehensive dental hygiene care.
- Increased complications for systemic conditions such as aspiration pneumonia, heart disease, inflammatory diseases and diabetes have been associated with poor oral health.¹⁻⁵ Timely access to appropriate oral care protects against potentially painful health risks.
- Preventative dental hygiene saves residents and their families time, money, grief, pain, and protects against increased risks of complications against common and novel health conditions including COVID-19.⁶
- Nurses understand that access to proper oral care is essential for the overall health and well-being of residents in long-term care, however the nursing scope does not extend to comprehensive oral care. Appropriate oral care requires the expertise of oral health professionals, such as dental hygienists.
- Working together in shared leadership, dental hygiene and nursing can provide fulsome and appropriate care to the residents of long-term care.

The onset of COVID-19 has highlighted the need to better address existing and emerging challenges within the long-term care sector. Residents in long-term care have complex needs, and as such require fulsome, team-based care from a variety of health care professionals to meet their multi-faceted and often evolving health requirements. Residents in long-term care deserve to live, smile, eat, and talk without pain and with dignity. Dental pain, inflammatory periodontal diseases (gingivitis and periodontitis), denture stomatitis, oral cancer, and other oral conditions negatively impact quality of life for over 3.5 billion people worldwide.¹⁻⁴ Increased complications for systemic conditions including aspiration pneumonia, heart disease, inflammatory diseases, diabetes, and more have long been associated with poor oral health.¹⁻⁵ Recently, research suggests that an increased risk of complications

from COVID-19 may be associated with periodontal disease.⁶ Compared to those without periodontal diseases, patients were 3.5 times more likely to be admitted into the intensive care unit, 4.5 times more likely to require a ventilator, and 8.8 times more likely to succumb to COVID-19.⁶ As we have seen, seniors living in long-term care facilities are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 complications as a result of age and also because many have existing complex health conditions.⁷⁻⁸ In all contexts, and particularly in long-term care, a strong focus on oral health protects overall health.

Residents and frontline health care workers in long-term care facilities acutely feel the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as outbreaks and breakthrough infections continue.⁷ In particular, the nursing role in long-term care is complex, multi-faceted and focused on the first principle of nursing - to provide safe, compassionate, and ethical care. Nurses, along with health care assistants, are typically onsite at facilities 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Nurses have broad responsibilities that include care planning, assessments, scheduling and charting, in addition to clinical treatments that may include wound and skin care, medication administration, ostomy care, ventilation, and more. Nurses also supervise health care assistants and other personal support workers who provide personal care such as assistance with eating, dressing, and overall hygiene. The nursing role also extends to communication and emotional wellness for both the resident and their families, which is often deeply personal.

According to British Columbia's *Residential Care Regulation Act*, each licensed long-term residential care facility is required to develop an oral care plan for every resident.⁹ However, due to a long list of responsibilities in providing complex care, nursing staff face time constraints, limited support, limited manpower, a lack of incentives, and other challenges that prevent the prioritization of oral care—especially if residents are resistant, have complex behavioural or cognitive conditions, or experience dysphagia.¹⁰ As dental hygiene services were not indicated as essential during initial COVID-19 lockdowns, dental hygienists faced interruptions in delivering in-person oral care services due to limited access to long-term care facilities.¹¹ This meant that during the height of COVID-19 restrictions from mid-February until the late summer of 2020, residents experienced worsening oral conditions which may have been prevented with timely and ongoing access to oral care services. However, many residents may not have had proper oral care many months prior to February 2020 due to existing challenges to care provision. These barriers to care ultimately impact the residents whom high quality oral care matters the most. The vast majority of nurses understand that access to proper oral care is essential for the overall health and well-being of residents in long-term care. While comprehensive and deferential to the complexity of needs of those in long-term care and assisted living, the nursing scope of practice does not extend to comprehensive oral care. Appropriate oral care requires the expertise of oral health professionals, such as dental hygienists.

Regardless of whether a resident has natural teeth or dentures, their oral care deserves a proper and consistent level of care and attention. Dental hygienists have the knowledge and expertise to collaborate with nurses in all phases of oral care including the initial oral health assessment, oral health care planning, the provision and training of in-person oral care, providing education and guidance to families, and collaborating with other health care providers to ensure positive oral and overall health outcomes. Dental hygienists have a prevention-focused practice, utilizing a process of care similar to the nursing

model. Preventative dental hygiene care saves residents and their families time, money, grief, pain, and protects against increased risks of complications for common and novel health conditions. Through utilization of the full dental hygiene scope of practice, residents' oral care will improve, oral-related emergencies can be reduced, and other health care professionals can be engaged at the appropriate time. Residents deserve to have the right care provider at the right time and nurses deserve a consistent oral health care partner in dental hygienists to support residents in maintaining their oral and overall health. Working together, dental hygiene and nursing can provide fulsome and appropriate care to the residents of long-term care.

Interprofessional collaborative models of care improve health outcomes, quality of life and patient safety.^{12,13} They give all members of the health care team a chance to maximize their full scope of practice improving the management of financial resources, human resources, and time.^{14,13} Interprofessional teamwork leads to shared knowledge, mutual support, and innovative solutions to increasingly complex health challenges.^{12,13} Ultimately, an interprofessional approach puts the individual first and incorporates them as a decision-making partner in their own health.^{14,15} A diverse health care team including dental hygienists in long-term care settings is a step towards improving primary health care in British Columbia. Increasing access to oral care puts the needs of residents first, improves the screening of potentially painful oral complications and the management of current oral diseases.

Recommendations

- Prioritize oral care as essential care to promote oral health and prevent oral diseases, in turn decreasing barriers to accessing oral care services provided by oral health professionals such as dental hygienists.
- Ensure that long-term care facilities are appropriately staffed with a diverse mix of health care providers and continue to develop interprofessional collaborative competence and opportunities to maximize full scope of practice utilization.
- Provide opportunities for those working in long-term care to learn with, from and about each others' roles in such a way that fosters interprofessional collaboration and an increased understanding of the distinct role each health care provider plays.
- Ensure that long-term care residents, their families and staff have access to dental hygiene care, knowledge, and expertise by incorporating dental hygienists as key part of interprofessional teams in long-term residential care settings through all phases of oral care from assessment to delivery and evaluation.
- Engage dental hygienists in development of resident oral health programs, provision of oral care training for direct care workers in long-term care and communication with family members to ensure optimal oral care for residents.
- Ensure all residents have equitable and appropriate access to basic oral care supplies such as toothbrushes and fluoride toothpastes as essential medicines without additional costs or barriers.¹⁴



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