



## Advocating for Expanded Access to Dental Care

By Scott Wolfe, Executive Director, Canadian Association of Community Health Centres

### *Issue & Opportunity*

Canada's universal "medicare" system is a source of great pride for Canadians based on the principle that everyone has access to health care no matter their income or where they live. But our universal health care system does not cover care for our teeth and gums.

Oral health is a fundamental component of overall health. One cannot be truly healthy if one has diseased teeth and gums, and suffers dental pain. Yet there has been little public discussion of the federal government's role in ensuring access to dental care as part of the commitment to universal healthcare. This needs to change.

An estimated 20% of people in Canada cannot access dental care due to lack of insurance and the high costs of private dentistry. There are significant income-related inequities in oral health and access to dental care. People with the highest levels of oral health problems are also those with the greatest difficulty accessing dental care.

An estimated 32% of people in Canada do not have dental insurance. With the retirement of baby boomers and growth of the "gig economy" where individuals typically have no employer dental care benefits, gaps in access to dental care and associated health inequities are growing. The impact is felt disproportionately by working poor adults, children from low-income families, Indigenous people, seniors and new immigrants.

There are significant economic and social costs when people cannot get the dental care they need, and we all pay as a result. In Ontario, over \$38 million worth of avoidable visits are made to hospital emergency rooms and doctors' offices each year due to lack of coverage for dental care. In Alberta, it costs the province up to \$6.2 million annually for dental visits to emergency rooms that should be treated by a dentist.

Gaps in access to dental care also result in other preventable healthcare costs: research shows a clear link between poor oral health and the severity of chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.

The lack of access to dental care has impacts on employment and economic development as well. Oral diseases and missing teeth affect a person's sense of self-worth and their ability to get employment. It is tough to look for and secure a job while experiencing dental pain or if you are missing teeth. And, each year in Canada thousands of school and work hours are lost due to dental issues.

With over 6 million Canadians unable to afford to see a dentist, the gap in access to dental care results in costs to our healthcare system, lost productivity, and pain for people suffering from dental decay and disease.

### *Moving To Action*

Federal government commitment to help fill this gap in access to dental care would have a big impact in improving the health and wellbeing of the most vulnerable people in our communities. It would also bolster economic development and reduce avoidable spending downstream on more costly health and social services.

Canada ranks second last among industrialized (OECD) countries in terms of the proportion of dental care services which are publicly-funded – only 6%. This correlates directly with the large gaps in access to care for uninsured Canadians.

Increased federal funding would help Canada begin to catch up with other industrialized countries in access to dental care. The best place to focus these investments is on expansion of the limited public dental programs now provided by provinces and territories, and on scaling up successful oral health services and programs delivered by Community Health Centres and public health units across the country.

The Canadian Association of Community Health Centres, of which the Saskatoon Community Clinic is a member, calls on the federal government to invest a minimum of \$600 million in new funding per year for public dental care, with funding to flow through two mechanisms: direct transfers to provinces and territories to expand public dental care programs; and, direct funding for Community Health Centres and public health units across Canada to expand their delivery of public dental care services. 