

Dental assistants demand freedom

The province's 6,100 workers have no say in professional standards

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It's supposed to be their week in the sun but B.C.'s dental assistants are feeling distinctly unappreciated.

The province's 6,100 dental assistants have only one delegate at the College of Dental Surgeons. The result is that B.C.'s dental assistants, who are almost 100 per cent women, have all the decisions concerning their profession made by their employers – dentists.

"When you're talking about 6,100 women being denied the right to oversee their own profession, it's unfair. I mean, we don't even have a vote," said Sheryl Haynes, president of the Certified Dental Assistants of British Columbia. There are 11 men working as dental assistants in the province, noted Haynes. Now, during Dental Assistants' Week, the association is lobbying to make the job a self-regulating profession. However, the Ministry of Health Services has denied the request.

The current arrangement places dentists in a potential conflict of interest, Haynes said.

"The governance structure is definitely not in the best interests of the public because we have dentists who are our employers being our regulators, saying what we can and can't do. And you can't tell me that dentists aren't making decisions for monetary gain versus what's in the best interests of the public," Haynes said.



Photo courtesy of Certified Dental Assistants of British Columbia

A dental assistant prepares a patient for an X-ray.

One example of this is the choice of some dentists to hire people without sufficient training, Haynes said. Certified dental assistants take an eight to 10-month course, learning about infection control, tooth polishing techniques and fluoride application as well as sterilization and hygiene control.

Camosun College offers the certificate program, but some dentists are saving money by hiring people who haven't taken the course.

"The good dentists in town, and I know quite a few of them here, would not hire somebody off the street. Then there are others that would ... I know practices in this

town that have people who are not credentialed and the public doesn't know that. The public expects, when they go to a doctor or a dentist, they are being treated by highly-qualified individuals who are credentialed, who are licensed to practice. That's not the case in dentistry."

Heather MacKay, acting registrar of the College of Dental Surgeons of B.C., said it is the college, not individual dentists, that regulates certified dental assistants. Therefore there is no conflict of interest.

Furthermore, there are two levels of dental assistants, she said. The first is called a chairside, who can be taught to do a limited number

of tasks by the dentist. The certified dental assistants' job descriptions are broader in scope, she explained.

"Chairsides can only do a narrow part of what a certified dental assistant can do. What (dentists) pay is not our business."

Ministry of Health Services spokesperson Sarah Plank said the government decided not to increase the number of regulatory colleges in the province to streamline the health system. Because dental assistants are supervised by dentists, there is no need for such a regulatory body, Plank said, adding it's not a question of money. Rather, it's about cutting red tape.

"We don't fund the regulatory colleges. The complexity of the system increases every time you have another regulatory body," Plank said.

In addition to giving dental assistants a say in their profession, self regulation would allow dental assistants to offer their services outside the dental office, in places like First Nations communities and rural areas that are currently under-served, Haynes said. Dental assistants in Alberta and Saskatchewan are self-regulating, and Manitoba and Ontario are moving in that direction, she added.

"It's a national trend and I find it very difficult to see B.C. not be part of that future."