



Overview

With the average Canadian worker spending nearly a quarter of their life at work, the importance of a healthy and respectful workplace is a contributing factor to achieving good overall health. Many studies have shown the negative impacts that an unhealthy work environment can have on workers' professional and personal lives. The CDAA strongly believes that all dental assistants are entitled to work in a healthy environment to maintain their overall health, both mentally and physically.

Recently, Canadians have seen the impact of bullying, harassment and abuse in the workplace through the #MeToo movement and the stories that brave women and men have shared publicly. Around the globe for the first time in history, individuals are speaking out against negative workplace environments, raising awareness about this important issue and advocating for change. As a result, in 2016, the Government of Canada investigated harassment in Canadian workplaces.¹ The results of this survey found that workers in health-related industries reported that they were more likely to experience harassment in the workplace than in any other sector.

In conversations over the years, dental assistants had come forward to CDAA representatives expressing their personal experiences in unhealthy work environments. Based on these anecdotes the CDAA began to question if their experiences were a common occurrence in the profession? And if so, how and to what extent? Was the experience of dental assistants similar to the findings in the Government of Canada study as it related to health professions? To answer these questions and many more, the CDAA contracted with a firm to develop a tool that would help answer these questions and for the first time gain data on the experiences of dental assistants in their work environment. The goals of the survey was to 1) collect feedback on the scope of issues related to healthy and respectful workplaces and 2) to gain a better understanding of the incidence of workplace issues related to harassment, bullying, abusive and violent behavior. Working collaboratively with a panel of dental assistants and representatives from Harry Cummings and Associates, CDAA developed and launched a survey of its members in November 2018. Harry Cummings and Associates then compiled the data, performing a detailed statistical analysis of the findings. The final report was presented to the CDAA Board of Directors and representatives from Provincial Dental Assisting Association during the CDAA Annual General Meeting on June 1, 2019.

Key Survey Findings

- **50% of respondents** have personally experienced some form of harassment, bullying, abuse and/or violent behavior **from their employer** over the course of their career as a dental assistant.
- **Close to 43% of respondents** have personally experienced some form of harassment, bullying, abuse and/or violent behavior **from patients** over the course of their career as a dental assistant.
- **42% of respondents** have personally experienced some form of harassment, bullying, abuse and/or violent behavior **from co-workers** over the course of their career as a dental assistant.
- **33% of respondents** have personally experienced some form of harassment, bullying, abuse and/or violent behavior **from office managers** over the course of their career as a dental assistant.
- **9% of our respondents reported sexual harassment in their career from dentists, 24% from patients.**
- Mistreatment in the workplace impacts workplace performance. **Approximately 26% of respondents experienced reduced efficiency and performance in the workplace, 13% reduced their hours at their workplace, and 11% took a leave of absence from their workplace (e.g. sick leave).**
- **66%** of the respondents reported that they **experienced stress and 61% considered quitting their job.**
- **35% of respondents quit their job as a result of mistreatment they experienced in the workplace.**

- **Dental assistants in larger urban centres are more likely to experience mistreatment in the workplace from all sources** (employer, office managers, co-workers, patients).
- **51% of dental assistants do not have a written contract in place with their employer.**
- **46% of respondents are employed in workplaces where there are no formal policies in place. 20% reported that they are unsure if a policy is in place. Of the 34% that confirmed that their employer has a workplace policy in place, 24% were unsure as to the adequacy of the policies.**
- A substantial proportion of respondents (30%) indicated that they do not always report or discuss the mistreatment that they experience in the workplace. **The major factors influencing this decision are concerns about possible retaliation from others in the workplace (71%) and the possible impact on their job security (68%).**

Next Steps

As part of the survey, dental assistants were asked to comment on what they consider to be key features / values of a healthy and respectful workplace. Specifically, respondents indicated the following:

- **Respect:** Treat everyone with respect. Make employees feel valued.
- **Good communication:** Promote regular communication between staff and the dentist and office manager. Welcome / allow others to raise issues without fear of judgement or reprisals.
- **Teamwork:** Foster a team environment and promote team building activities. Focus on working as a team with a common goal and values, clear roles and responsibilities. Support other team members to do their best.
- **Leadership:** Apply good management skills. Model respectful behavior. Be accessible and understanding in allowing others to safely express their concerns and have them taken seriously. Be supportive of staff and show a genuine concern about their well-being.

These important values/characteristics will be used as a basis to develop a vision of a healthy and respectful workplace for dental assistants across Canada and CDAA will also use this data to develop resources for dental assistants as they become agents for change in their own workplaces. Recognizing that the workplace environment affects all members of the dental team, the CDAA is also partnering with our industry colleagues from both the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) and the Canadian Dental Association (CDA), to determine how best to improve the work environment for all members of the oral healthcare team.

Speaking out, telling a personal story or answering questions anonymously, are difficult to do when discussing such a sensitive and personal topic as workplace bullying, harassment and abuse. CDAA acknowledges the bravery of the women and men who have come forward and whose openness and honesty has informed this study. Together, we can and will, make a difference.

Reference

1 Hango, Darcy and Melissa Moyser. 2018. "Harassment in Canadian workplaces". *Insights on Canadian Society*. December. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-006-X. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2018001/article/54982-eng.htm>