



Guidelines for Dental Hygienists in Alberta

Continuity of Care

August 2023



Table of Contents

Dental Hygienists' Responsibilities	2
What is Continuity of Care?.....	2
Ongoing or Episodic Care.....	2
Supporting the Patient's Right to Choose Their Dental Hygienist.....	3
Informing the Patient of Their Right to Choose	3
Taking Reasonable Steps.....	4
Presuming the Patient Intends to Exercise Their Right to Choose	4
Identifying the Patient's Dental Hygienist	4
Allowing the Patient to Reschedule Their Appointment	4
Discontinuing Care	5
Reasons to Discontinue Care.....	5
Steps Required When Discontinuing Care	5
Continuity of Care During Planned or Unplanned Leaves (Temporary or Permanent)	6
Closing a Practice.....	9
Acknowledgements	10

The Alberta College of Dental Hygienists (the College) provides guidelines to support dental hygienists in understanding and meeting their legislated requirements, Standards of Practice, and Code of Ethics. Guidelines establish professionally accepted means by which dental hygienists can achieve compliance with the College's standards.

Failing to comply with a guideline may be considered unprofessional conduct if the dental hygienist did not achieve compliance with the standard, or if the departure from the guideline compromises the quality of dental hygiene services or the integrity and/or credibility of the dental hygiene profession.

A dental hygienist may only depart from a guideline if they can demonstrate their chosen conduct:

- Achieves compliance with the applicable standard;
- Maintains the safety, effectiveness, or appropriateness of care required by the standard; and
- Upholds the integrity of the dental hygiene profession.

While these guidelines reflect the requirements for dental hygienists at the time of development, these requirements may change from time to time. Dental hygienists remain responsible for ensuring their practice meets current legislative requirements, Standards of Practice, and Code of Ethics.



Responsibilities Related to Continuity of Care

Below are specific responsibilities you have related to providing continuity of care to a patient:

Continuity of Care Standard of Practice

- The dental hygienist ensures continuity of care and only discontinues care in a manner that is safe and ethical.
- The dental hygienist must support the patient's right to choose their provider of dental hygiene services by:
 - (a) Informing the patient of the option to receive ongoing care from a specific dental hygienist;
 - (b) Recognizing when the patient has an expectation of ongoing care with the dental hygienist and taking reasonable steps to ensure that this is achieved.

Collaboration Standard of Practice

- The dental hygienist collaborates with patients, health professionals, and others in a cooperative, constructive, and respectful manner for the benefit of the patient.

Code of Ethics: Patient's Autonomy and Informed Choice

- The patient's autonomy concerns the patient's right to make their own informed choices, including the right of refusal. This principle guides the dental hygienist to support the patient in the decision-making process.

What is Continuity of Care?

Continuity of care benefits patients receiving care from dental hygienists. The [Health Quality Council of Alberta](#) describes continuity of care as “the degree to which a series of health care events is experienced as coherent and connected, and consistent with the client’s needs and personal context.” One aspect of continuity of care is ongoing care with a single healthcare provider.

The Health Quality Council of Alberta identifies that there is a growing body of evidence that continuity with a single healthcare provider is associated with better outcomes for patients, including, but not limited to:

- Improved health outcomes;
- Higher satisfaction rates; and
- More cost-effective care (e.g., services are not duplicated).

Ongoing or Episodic Care

“Ongoing care” and “episodic care” are distinct concepts that have different expectations for continuity of care. You are required to take reasonable steps to ensure patients who have an expectation of ongoing care can continue to see you if they so choose, but this expectation does not apply to episodic care.



Guidelines for Continuity of Care

- **Ongoing care** occurs when a dental hygienist initiates care that would be reasonably expected to extend beyond a single encounter. Ongoing care establishes a long-term therapeutic relationship between the dental hygienist and patient. The specific expectations of ongoing care can vary depending on the patient's oral health needs, goals, and preferences.
 - An expectation of ongoing care often occurs after you have determined a patient requires regular follow-up or continued care visits to treat an ongoing or chronic condition, at-risk state, or unmet oral health need (e.g., treating a patient for periodontitis, providing ongoing preventive services related to high caries risk).
 - This expectation of ongoing care may also reasonably exist when a patient seeks regular preventive care from a dental hygienist.
- **Episodic care** occurs when neither the dental hygienist nor the patient has the expectation of an ongoing care relationship (e.g., public health dental hygienist providing sealants on site in a school, dental hygienist temporarily standing in for another dental hygienist).
 - If you are providing episodic care to a patient, you should inform them that you will not be providing ongoing care beyond addressing the patient's presenting concern.

Supporting the Patient's Right to Choose Their Dental Hygienist

The Code of Ethics requires dental hygienists to support a patient's autonomy and informed choice. Patients have the right to make an informed choice about who provides their dental hygiene care. They may wish to continue their care with a single provider, or they may be comfortable receiving care from various dental hygienists. In either scenario, the patient needs to know who they are scheduled to receive services from to make an informed decision about whether to proceed.

Dental hygienists can support patients in choosing their care provider by:

- Informing the patient of their right to make this decision;
- Taking reasonable steps to give the patient the opportunity to continue their care with their preferred dental hygienist;
- Presuming the patient intends to exercise their right to choose unless the patient expressly indicates they have no preference;
- Providing information that is relevant to informed consent, including the identity of their care provider;
- Allowing the patient to reschedule their appointment if their preferred dental hygienist is unavailable.

Each of these points is described below.

Informing the Patient of Their Right to Choose

If you withhold this information, the patient may be unaware of their right.



Taking Reasonable Steps

When a patient identifies an expectation for ongoing care with a specified dental hygienist, the Standard of Practice requires reasonable steps to be taken to give the patient the opportunity to continue their care with that dental hygienist.

- Determining reasonable steps that should be taken to support the patient's choice can be approached by working collaboratively with other clinic staff, including employers and team members responsible for booking appointments.
- For example, reasonable steps can include offering the patient the option of prebooking into your available schedule.

Presuming the Patient Intends to Exercise Their Right to Choose

While a patient has the right to choose their dental hygienist, they may decide not to exercise it.

- If the patient expresses that they have no preference, then there is no requirement to continue booking their care with the previous dental hygienist.
- However, you cannot assume that the patient has no preference for their dental hygienist; always confirm this with the patient.

Identifying the Patient's Dental Hygienist

The patient's right to choose is reflected in the informed consent process. Part of the process of obtaining informed consent is providing relevant information to the patient.

- Informed consent includes identifying who will be involved in or providing the dental hygiene service.
- Providing relevant information allows the patient the opportunity to make an informed refusal if they are not booked with their preferred dental hygienist.

Allowing the Patient to Reschedule Their Appointment

Like expectations in other healthcare environments, it is unacceptable for a patient who is expecting to see their ongoing dental hygienist to be booked with another provider without their consent.

- Dental hygienists should collaborate with others (e.g., employer, office manager, office staff, etc.) in their practice setting to ensure that there are policies in place to respect the patient's autonomy and support their choice of provider.

The patient should be given an opportunity to reschedule their appointment with their preferred provider in the event the provider is unavailable (e.g., sickness).

- Inform patients who they will be seeing before they present for care to demonstrate that you respect the patient's interests and support their right to choose their provider.
 - This duty can be delegated to others in the office if it is not feasible to do yourself.
- If your patient has not been informed in advance that you will be their provider, tell the patient your name and role before seeking consent to proceed with the appointment.



Discontinuing Care

Discontinuing care involves actively choosing to stop providing dental hygiene services to a patient who has an expectation of ongoing care.

Reasons to Discontinue Care

Dental hygienists have the ethical obligation to maintain a therapeutic and professional patient-dental hygienist relationship that is for the benefit of the patient. Use your professional judgment to determine if a therapeutic and professional relationship can no longer be maintained. This may occur if:

- Your judgment becomes affected by a personal relationship with the patient;
- Your ability to meet your Standards of Practice and provide safe, ethical care is compromised by your interactions with the patient;
- Trust and mutual respect no longer exist in the relationship;
- The patient poses a safety risk;
- The patient is abusive (e.g. threatening or inappropriate behaviour);
- The patient fails to respect professional boundaries; or
- You are no longer able to practice because of personal illness or other urgent circumstances.

If you decide the professional relationship cannot be maintained, you may discontinue care in a safe, ethical manner that respects the dignity of the patient and ensures the patient's oral health is not compromised in the dismissal process.

Dental hygienists cannot discontinue care for a reason that is related to:

- A [protected ground of discrimination](#) including race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation.
- The patient's values, life circumstances or culture;
- The patient's failure to keep appointments or pay outstanding fees unless advance notice has been given to the patient;
- The dental hygienist's relocation of their practice if the patient can reasonably attend the new location.

Steps Required When Discontinuing Care

If you discontinue care, you must give reasonable advance notice to the patient and document the reason for discontinuing care in the patient record.

- Advanced written notice is recommended.
 - There may be circumstances where advanced written notice cannot be provided (e.g., personal illness).
 - In these circumstances, you may choose to provide verbal notice followed by written notice.
 - Written notice should include:
 - The reason for discontinuing care;



Guidelines for Continuity of Care

- Options for alternative care providers;
- Information about how the patient may access their health information or have it sent to their new care provider.
- You may choose to seek legal advice when deciding whether to discontinue a patient's care and/or what information the notice should include.
- How far in advance to give notice depends on the circumstances.
 - If you are in an unsafe situation with an abusive patient, it may be reasonable that the notice immediately precedes discontinuing care.
 - If you are in a situation where you cannot give notice far in advance (e.g., personal illness), you may give short notice.
 - If you are aware your personal relationship (i.e., friendship) with the patient will affect the professional relationship and you must discontinue care, you may give them a longer amount of time to access another provider (e.g., months prior to their next scheduled appointment).

Continuity of Care During Planned or Unplanned Leaves (Temporary or Permanent)

Dental hygienists are expected to determine reasonable steps for continuity of care when they temporarily (e.g., maternity or parental leave, sick leave) or permanently (e.g., ending employment) leave a practice setting. Patients can expect to be given options for how to continue their dental hygiene care if their dental hygienist is unavailable at their usual practice setting. The patient ultimately decides how they wish to continue their care.

If you are unable to provide services at a practice setting for a period of time, then you are responsible for taking steps to ensure that your patients have a means of continuing their dental hygiene care.

- The goal is for your patients who have an ongoing expectation of care to have the opportunity to continue accessing services to meet their oral health needs.

The reasonable steps you take depend on the circumstances of your situation. Consider the following when determining your reasonable steps:

- The patient's goals, needs and interests;
- Legislated privacy requirements;
- The practice setting;
- Your practice arrangement;
- Whether the absence is planned or unplanned;
- Whether the absence is temporary or permanent;
- How the patient can continue their care with you in a new practice setting; and
- Alternate oral healthcare providers who may be available to provide care in your absence.

Each point is described below.



Guidelines for Continuity of Care

The Patient's Goals, Needs and Interests

If you are leaving a practice setting, consider how your patients will be affected.

- Is there another oral health care provider who can manage the follow-up care and ongoing treatment of diagnosed oral health conditions for the patient at this practice setting?
- Does this provider have the required competencies to treat the patient (e.g., if a patient requires nitrous oxide/oxygen sedation for dental hygiene treatment)?
- If there is no other oral health care provider who can continue the patient's care at the practice setting, are there any other providers in the area that patient could access?

You may need to take additional steps to ensure continuity of care for your patients who are in active treatment (e.g., a patient who requires multiple appointments which have not yet been completed). These patients will need to be informed before their next scheduled appointment that their provider will be changing or, if possible, given information for how to continue their treatment with you.

Legislated Privacy Requirements

The *Health Information Act* (HIA) prohibits dental hygienists from accessing health information for a reason that is inconsistent with their employment/contracted duties without the custodian's permission (HIA section 28).

- You must not use contact information for the purpose of informing your patients of your new practice location without the custodian's permission. The custodian decides whether to disclose information to a person who is responsible for providing continuing treatment and care to the patient (HIA section 35(1)(b)).
- If the custodian does not disclose the patient's contact information to you, your patient may contact the College to be put in touch with you.

The Practice Setting

Consider the practice setting's location and whether dental hygiene services will continue to be provided there.

- If you work in a remote setting or there is no one available at that practice setting to continue your patients' care, you should take steps to locate the nearest available oral health care provider for your patients to see and provide that information to your patients.

Your Practice Arrangement

If you work in a practice arrangement (e.g., employed, contracted, partnered) with another health professional, collaborate to clearly define the expectations for ensuring your patients' continuity of care (e.g., in contract negotiation). Ideally, this is established before you leave.

Establish:

- Who will be responsible for managing continuity of care if you are unavailable;
- How continuity of care will be achieved (e.g., another provider in the practice setting will manage your patients' care, a provider from outside the practice



Guidelines for Continuity of Care

setting will be identified, or your new practice setting information will be given to your patients who have an expectation of ongoing care);

If the terms of your practice arrangement prevent you from meeting your professional obligations (e.g., to ensure continuity of care for your patients), seek legal advice.

Planned or Unplanned Absences

Planned absences include vacations and certain types of leaves (e.g., maternity or parental leave) where notice may be given in advance to your patients.

- When a leave is planned, you have more time to collaborate with others to provide continuity of care for the period you will be absent.
- Ensure your practice setting has a policy in place where patients are informed of the change in provider during planned absences.
 - The principle that patients should be informed of their provider before their appointment still applies.

Unplanned absences (e.g., sick leave, terminated employment) require protocols to be in place to manage unreasonable gaps in care.

- Depending on the circumstances, you may be unable to arrange for continuity of care.
- Ensure your practice setting has a policy or plan for informing your patients about their options for care if you are absent (e.g., seeing an alternate provider, rescheduling).

It is unacceptable for a patient to arrive and not be informed that you are absent if they have expressly stated that they prefer their ongoing care with you.

Temporary or Permanent Absences

Continuity of care can be maintained while you are temporarily absent (e.g., vacation, sick leave, maternity/parental leave) by arranging to have an alternate care provider available for your patients or rescheduling your patients for when you return.

- If your patients see an alternate dental hygienist, the relationship between you and the other dental hygienist is collaborative. Communicate with each other to ensure there are no gaps in care (e.g., if necessary, follow-up evaluation appointments are scheduled).

If you are permanently leaving a practice setting, consider your practice arrangement and whether you can collaborate with others in your practice (e.g., employers, partners, etc.) to arrange for continuity of care, including providing patients with information for how to continue their care with you at your new practice setting or arranging for an alternate oral health care provider. It is important to consider privacy legislation in these circumstances (see section [“Legislated Privacy Requirements”](#)).

Arranging for Your Patients to Continue Their Care with You in a New Practice Setting

Patients should be given the choice to continue their care with you if you move to a new practice setting.

- Collaborate with others in your practice arrangement to arrange for your patients to be provided with information to contact you at your new location.



Guidelines for Continuity of Care

Patients can also find out a dental hygienist's practice location by contacting the College.

- You have a professional obligation to direct a patient to contact the College if they request their previous dental hygienist's contact information and you are unable to provide that information.
- The College may collect the patient's contact information and, with the patient's consent, provide that information to the dental hygienist who can then follow up with their patient who has an expectation of an ongoing care relationship.
- The College is not responsible for continuity of care beyond the transfer of information;
 - If you have discontinued the patient's care and taken the [appropriate steps](#), then you are not required to contact them.
 - If you have not taken steps to discontinue care, then you should contact the patient to facilitate ongoing care with you or provide the patient with contact information for alternate oral health care providers.

Alternate Oral Health Care Providers

If the practice setting has alternate oral health care providers (e.g., dental hygienists, dentists) available, you may arrange for the other providers to manage your patients' care.

- Providing options for alternate oral health care providers would be reasonable for continuity of care if you are moving a far distance and it may not be possible for your patients to attend your new practice setting.
 - You may still inform your patients of your move so they can decide how to proceed, but receiving care from an alternate provider may be more feasible for them.

Closing a Practice

If you provide dental hygiene services at a practice setting that is closing and you are not the custodian of the health information, collaborate with the custodian to ensure patients know how to access their health information once the practice closes and are given options for other oral health care providers to continue their care.

Dental hygiene practice owners who close their practice are responsible for describing to the College the steps they have taken to ensure continuity of care. This includes:

- What notice was provided to patients to ensure they can continue their care with the dental hygienist or another oral health care provider;
- What steps were taken to ensure continuity of care, including whether the dental hygienist's new location was shared or if options for alternate oral healthcare providers were given to the patient;
- Where patient records will be stored, including plans for safeguarding and retaining patient records (see [Record Management Standard of Practice](#));
- How patients may access their records for the duration of the retention period (see [Record Management Standard of Practice](#)).



Guidelines for Continuity of Care

- Patient records must be retained for a minimum of 10 years following the date of the last service provided or, in the case of minor patients, until the patient is 20 years of age or for 10 years, whichever is longer.

Acknowledgements

ACDH acknowledges the College of Dental Surgeons of Alberta, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, College of Physiotherapists of Alberta, and Health Quality Council of Alberta as references for content in this guideline's development.

