

# Focus *on* Seniors' Programs

*As part of this special edition of JCDA devoted to seniors, we are featuring 3 programs that focus on improving the oral health of frail elderly persons and adults with special needs in Canada.*

*The ELDERS (Elders Link with Dental Education, Research and Service) group, the Halton Oral Health Outreach (HOHO) project and MultiGen Healthcare Inc. are prime examples of groups that are making a valuable contribution toward the oral health and overall well-being of seniors across the country.*

*We hope that these profiles prove informative to those within the dental profession and beyond, adding to the dialogue on an issue of importance both to our profession and the population it serves.*

## ELDERS Group — Elders' Link with Dental Education, Research and Service

The ELDERS (Elders' Link with Dental Education, Research and Service) group began in the 1980s at the University of British Columbia (UBC) faculty of dentistry, as a way to document and address the distribution of oral health problems in long-term care (LTC) facilities and to explore ways for managing the problems encountered among frail elderly persons.

Drs. Michael MacEntee, Chris Wyatt, Joanne Walton and Ross Bryant currently comprise the primary ELDERS group research team. They collaborate on projects with a multidisciplinary team that includes social workers, sociologists, geriatricians, psychologists, nurses and statisticians from UBC, along with a staff of about 20 full- or part-time research assistants.

"Our initial studies found how difficult it was for frail elders to access dental care, and we explored in depth how dentists felt about domiciliary care," says Dr. MacEntee. "Very few of the residents examined in our epidemiological studies had been seen by a dentist, dental hygienist or denturist since becoming institutionalized. Consequently, we found that missing teeth, ill-fitting dentures, damaged oral mucosa, rampant caries and periodontal disease were commonplace in nursing homes.

"Following our initial studies, we focused specifically on the rampant caries to isolate the predictors of caries in this population," he continues. "More recently, we have been investigating preventive



Dr. Sandra Huish and Melanie Rockwell provide dental care to a resident of a long-term care facility at the UBC specialty clinic.

strategies for oral diseases ranging from the long-term use of antibacterial agents against dental decay to new oral health-related educational programs for care aides in the LTC facilities around Vancouver."

Similar investigations were made to look at oral health problems in older adults who are relatively healthy and who live independently in the community. "Our objectives are to explore the significance of the mouth in old age in a way that might throw light on the cause of oral problems as age progresses," notes Dr. MacEntee. "The results offer very realistic insights to dentistry for older adults, and a keen awareness of the importance of mouth care to health and well-being generally."

On another front, the ELDERS group has addressed the problems experienced by dentists

who provide care in nursing homes. “At the outset, we confirmed that dentists, like physicians, feel uncomfortable and insecure with this aspect of dental practice,” explains Dr. MacEntee. “Consequently, we are designing educational initiatives to improve the geriatric education of dentists and dental hygienists.”

In a large qualitative study among the staff of the facilities, the researchers found that the oral health care of the residents conflicts with many other demands and priorities confronting administrators, nurses and care aides. It seems that many staff members in LTC facilities feel that they lack both the education and the time to provide oral health care adequately to the residents. The ELDERS group has support from the Vancouver Foundation to develop an educational program for care aides to address this problem, and is preparing a proposal to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) for an operating grant to explore the issues in greater depth and to provide practical solutions for these chronic problems.

As for future research, the group has received support from CIHR and Straumann Canada for a randomized clinical trial on the long-term management of dentures supported by oral implants.

“Overall, we are trying to explain and address many of the problems facing us all as we age,” he says. “We are working toward a better understanding of the role of dentistry and oral health care in a population of older adults that will soon include 1 in every 4 Canadians,” concludes Dr. MacEntee.

Learn more about the ELDERS group activities and achievements by reading, “The development, implementation, utilization and outcomes of a comprehensive dental program for older adults residing in long-term care facilities” in the electronic version of this month’s *JCDA* at [www.cda-adc.ca/jcda/vol-72/issue-5/419.html](http://www.cda-adc.ca/jcda/vol-72/issue-5/419.html).

Visit the ELDERS group website at <http://www.elders.dentistry.ubc.ca/>.

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# Halton Oral Health Outreach (HOHO) Project

The Halton Oral Health Outreach (HOHO) project is a group strategy that was developed to help adults with special needs and frail elderly persons access oral health care services in the Halton region of Ontario. The program links this target population and their families or caregivers to dental treatment services and provides assistance with daily oral care needs.

Launched in 1998, the HOHO project is a partnership between the Halton Region Health Department and the Community Care Access Centre (CCAC) of Halton. CCAC coordinates dental services by serving as a single point of access for those seeking oral health information or assistance in Halton. The Health Department conducts an annual survey in long-term care (LTC) facilities and hospitals, and provides education and training for staff who work in LTC settings.

## Coordination of Service

CCAC is responsible for coordinating all health care services for seniors and special needs adults in the region. Staff work with patients and caregivers to determine the type of care or services required. They also provide information, assess health status and manage the process of admission of people into LTC facilities.

Including CCAC as a primary player has been instrumental to the success of the HOHO project,



A nursing assistant uses the "hug" technique on an LTC resident who has difficulty cooperating. Two people work together in these situations to provide care.

according to Ms. Ellen Ross, dental health promoter with the Health Department. "As the first point of contact for those seeking entry into an LTC facility, CCAC case managers are able to identify the target population and screen patients to determine if oral care is required," she explains. "They effectively reinforce the importance of oral health to overall health at the beginning of the screening process."

Health Department staff have trained CCAC case managers to administer a basic oral care assessment to all clients being placed in an LTC facility. This verbal assessment asks such fundamental questions as "when was the last time you were seen by a dentist?" If oral care is required or has been requested, CCAC case managers can then refer patients to accessible dental health professionals located in the area.

## Access to Dental Care

Locating the appropriate dental professionals to provide treatment for frail elderly persons can pose a challenge. To overcome this barrier, CCAC compiles and maintains a database of all dental professionals in Halton who are willing and able to treat frail elderly or special needs patients. The database indicates such factors as whether the dental practice is wheelchair accessible or if the practitioner provides homecare services.



Ms. Ellen Ross, dental health promoter with the Halton Region Health Department, gives a hug of reassurance to an LTC resident after an oral care session.

*Photos courtesy of Halton Oral Health Outreach project.*



Oral care is administered to a bed-bound resident. The mouth is propped with a second toothbrush to reduce the risk of the caregiver being bitten.

“Some families or patients contact CCAC and tell us that they simply can’t walk up the stairs to the dental office anymore, or perhaps travelling to the dentist’s office is no longer possible,” says Ms. Ross.

While there are often physical barriers for seniors trying to access care, there can also be financial constraints. To help people in these situations, the HOHO program has championed a financial assistance program. Known as “Dental Care Counts,” the program is designed to help those elderly or special needs patients who require urgent dental care, and meet the program criteria, to get referrals to dental health professionals.

“The Burlington Dental Academy (BDA) has been extremely cooperative in making local dentists available to administer care for those in need,” says Ms. Ross. CCAC case managers can consult a roster of available dentists and make recommendations that suit the patient’s requirements.

In some cases, patients are not well enough to visit a dental practice and may need to be treated in a hospital setting. BDA organizes a roster of dentists who perform hospital rotations or even provide services in people’s homes. For instance, at the Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital in Burlington, dentists are on call to treat complex continuing care patients or special needs patients. The HOHO team worked together with BDA to donate equipment and supplies to establish a new dental operatory in the hospital for the treatment of in-patients and community-dwelling, special needs patients.

CCAC also handles cases of frail elderly and special needs adults who are at high risk or may be

receiving homecare. Case managers perform oral care assessments on these patients on an annual basis.

### Caregivers Receive Training

Ms. Ross plays an active role in training and educating caregivers and nursing staff in LTC facilities. She offers a hands-on learning workshop for staff treating individuals who may have difficulty cooperating when receiving oral care. “These training sessions give nursing staff or caregivers the tools and techniques they need to provide daily oral care,” she says. “Demonstrating effective techniques for getting into people’s mouths without being bitten gives them more confidence to provide care on a routine basis.” Training sessions on specialized care, such as working with people with dysphagia, are also administered by HOHO team members.

LTC facilities that work with the HOHO program have access to additional resources like information sheets on various disease processes, screening tools, oral care plans and CD-ROMs and brochures. When unusual cases arise, HOHO staff will provide information and consultation.

To date, the program has assessed over 5,000 people and provided financial assistance for 225 clients in need. “The HOHO program has enhanced interdisciplinary relationships and forged partnerships between the health care sectors in the Halton community,” states Ms. Ross. “It has resulted in an improved continuity of care for the patients and raised awareness of patients, caregivers and local institutions about the importance of oral health to overall health.”

The HOHO project has not been without its challenges. A general shortage of nurses and health care workers in the community and multiple personnel changes make the need for ongoing training a necessity. Difficulties with transportation and attendant care are also issues that the project must contend with.

The HOHO committee continues to raise awareness and advocate for service improvement. “Our hope is that this successful model of care will be transferred to other provinces as well as across Canada and globally,” concludes Ms. Ross.

For more information about the HOHO program, contact the Halton Region Health Department at (905) 825-6000 or 1 (866) 442-5866 or the Community Care Access Centre (CCAC) of Halton at (905) 639-5228 or 1 (800) 810-0000.

# MultiGen Healthcare Inc.

It seems that dental journals, magazines and advertisers are placing an emphasis on implants, teeth whitening in one hour, cosmetic and other esthetic dentistry services,” says Dr. Alain Thivierge, executive vice-president of health and dental for MultiGen Healthcare Inc. “This creates the impression that no one is interested in taking care of patients living in long-term care (LTC) facilities. The teeth that dentists once restored, crowned or treated with root canal are being left unattended and are susceptible to decay.”

According to data on seniors’ oral health in Canada, since the mid-1990s more than 70% of people aged 65 years or older have retained their natural dentition.<sup>1</sup>

This figure represents a significant increase over past decades. As a population group, seniors are at a greater risk for recurrent caries and related dental problems. While 90% of seniors living in institutions require regular dental care, less than 10% see a dentist each year.<sup>2</sup>

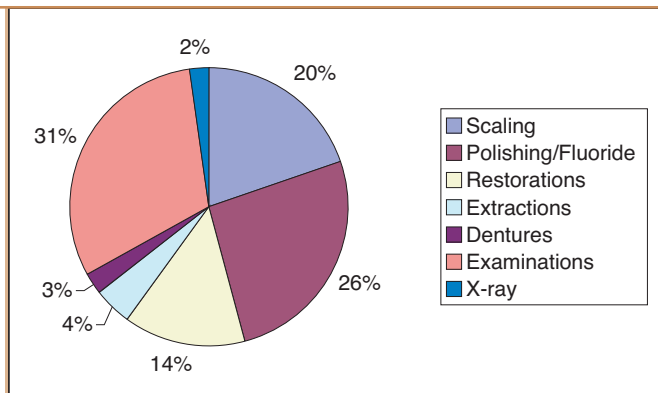
Aware of this pending crisis, Dr. Thivierge of Wakefield, Quebec, and Dr. Jacques Bourgon of Hawkesbury, Ontario, set out in 1998 to address the situation. Together they launched a service that would meet the unique needs of elderly persons residing in LTC homes in their local communities. By 2001, MultiGen Healthcare (“MultiGen”) was testing its service in other areas of the country and has since expanded its mobile dental program for seniors on a national basis.

“MultiGen meets the challenge of an increased demand by offering an innovative dental delivery system,” says Dr. Thivierge.

## On-site Dental Care

MultiGen field teams are organized into groups of accredited dental professionals generally consisting of a dentist and a dental assistant. They work with the latest dental equipment and techniques to ensure that seniors are served by a quality dental care program without having to leave the comfort of their residence.

Custom-made mobile dental equipment allows the field teams to perform a full range of oral care services. “Our field teams are given all the equipment that would be used in a static clinic, such as electric high-speed handpieces, suction and curing lights,” says Dr. Thivierge.



**Figure 1:** Procedures performed during an 8-month period from April 22, 2005, to January 1, 2006 (n = 8,583).

Figure 1 shows a breakdown of the distribution of procedures performed by the MultiGen field teams. “A high percentage of these procedures involve assessment and maintenance required for proper dental health,” explains Dr. Thivierge. “This helps control the level of pathological oral bacteria that can lead to infections and other complications.

“The maintenance of dental function is also a priority,” he continues. “Loss of teeth can lead to an inappropriate intake of nutrients in seniors that can accelerate the downward spiral of disease.

“The overall goal is to improve oral hygiene and awareness among the elderly while facilitating access to these services for everyone, namely the residences, the care facility employees and the guardians,” says Dr. Thivierge. “We take a multidisciplinary approach, providing educational resources and support to everyone involved in seniors’ care. This helps people follow our established protocols.”

To maintain an acceptable level of oral care between visits, MultiGen’s core values — that the dental procedures be focused on maximizing functionality, minimizing discomfort and avoiding emergencies — are reinforced amongst caregivers at participating LTC facilities.

## Fully Managed Mobile Service

Today, MultiGen is the largest provider of fully managed mobile dental services in Ontario, Quebec and Alberta. The company continues to demonstrate a commitment to maintaining its leading position, having recently expanded its services into Nova Scotia in April 2006. The company provides mobile dental services to over 350 facilities, both LTC and

retirement homes, and works with over 25 dentists across Canada.

“Based on the needs in each region, MultiGen reaches out to the dental community in order to invite dentists to contract with us on a part-time basis,” continues Dr. Thivierge. “Some dentists decide to work with us one or two days a week, while others choose to participate once a month or only for certain homes in specific locations. We work closely with dental societies to create awareness of our program and for recruitment purposes.”



One of MultiGen’s field teams administering care at an LTC facility with mobile equipment.



MultiGen dental professionals shown interacting with a patient.

In Ontario, MultiGen has 7 field teams operating in Ottawa/Gatineau, Belleville/Kingston, Peterborough, Barrie, Kitchener and London. In Alberta, the teams work in Calgary and Edmonton. Halifax will be the first location in Nova Scotia. MultiGen’s services also reach out to many rural communities within each region.

To assist the field teams, 2 administrators handle the scheduling, booking, billing and collections at MultiGen’s head office, located in Ottawa. “We manage all aspects of the service delivery, staffing and equipment needs to allow our team to focus on what they do best — provide the highest level of dental care to seniors living in LTC facilities,” notes Dr. Thivierge. In 8 months alone in 2005, MultiGen field teams programmed more than 900 visits and performed nearly 8,600 dental procedures on more than 4,000 elderly patients.

Dr. Thivierge believes that the facilities who use MultiGen’s services have an advantage over the homes that do not provide a dental program to their residents. “Our services become a value-added service that the residents and their families enjoy,” he claims. “Most families who have a loved one in a nursing home simply don’t have the means to take them to a dental office or they can’t take time off work or perhaps they live in another city.

“MultiGen established a way to provide the needed solutions and is committed in continuing the proper delivery with the proper support so that ultimately, access to dental care for seniors becomes an accepted, integrated service of all LTC facilities,” concludes Dr. Thivierge.

To learn more about MultiGen’s dental care program for seniors, visit its website at <http://www.multigenhealthcare.com>. ♦

## References

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2. Marvin M. Access to care for seniors — dental concerns. *J Can Dent Assoc* 2001; 67(9):504–6.

Photos courtesy of MultiGen Healthcare Inc.