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Tooth Solitudes: Dental hygienists free of dentists' grips

Presented by



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Jim Ross/National Post

It was like pulling teeth but hygienists are now ready to taste success after a 15-year battle to work independently of Ontario dentists.

The decision to allow hygienists with at least two years of experience to hang out a shingle in the country's largest province, coupled with similar moves in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia, has created a business opportunity that Independent Dental Hygiene Centres is hoping to turn into a national network -- even if it comes at the expense of

dentists.

The Toronto-based company opened for business last June, with two locations and one key promise: Undercut the fees of dentists, who for years have overseen the cleaning of Canadians' teeth.

Ironically, at the forefront of the battle for our choppers is Brian Price, a 62-year-old former dentist, who has not practiced dentistry in more than 20 years and is an owner of Independent Dental Hygiene.

Dr. Price, who now considers himself an entrepreneur, has waged battle with his industry before. He was the man who brought dentistry to shopping malls and Saturday and Sunday hours in the 1980s, which he says flew in the face of the wishes of most dentists who didn't want to compete and work weekends. Tridont Dental Centres now has dozens of locations, although he sold out nearly 20 years ago.

"I followed the plight of the hygienist as they tried to get their independence," Dr. Price says. "The [relationship with the dentist] has not always worked well for them."

Today marks the beginning of National Dental Hygienists Week in Canada and if you happened to have had a dental appointment to clean your teeth recently and noticed the dentist was nowhere insight you are not alone. Legislative changes requested by dentists made it possible for hygienists in some provinces to work alone as long as they are under a "dentist's orders."

"All the dentists wanted Friday afternoons off so they could go golfing and they pushed for the changes," says Dr. Price, adding that request has now come back to haunt them.

Hygienists in Ontario argued that the "dentist's orders" rule had already shown hygienists were capable of working on their own when it comes to cleaning teeth. The province finally agreed about two years

ago, that hygienists could also go into under-serviced rural regions and retirement homes where dentists rarely tread.

Teeth cleaning and whitening is a booming profession. The only publicly financed school in Toronto is George Brown College and it gets about 25 applicants for every one person it selects for its two-year hygienist program that costs close to \$25,000. Private schools costs can run \$35,000 and up.

The fees and difficulty of getting into a program may seem high but the financial reward can more than compensate. A hygienist makes a minimum \$35-an-hour right out of school and it is not unheard of for some to make more than \$100,000 a year.

Susan Rudin, co-ordinator for George Brown's dental hygienist program, says the new rules make it possible for hygienists to drum up even more business but she says the public overall will be better off because hygienists are more flexible and end up servicing a more remote clientele.

"The legislation has allowed dental hygienists to have control over where they want to practise as opposed to being told where they have to practise," Ms. Rudin says. "I still believe in a collaborate approach with dentists but it doesn't have to be in the same office."

While the threat to dentists may be perceived, Ms. Rudin says she hasn't yet seen that many hygienist set up their own practices. There are no hard statistics but insurers report only a small percentage of their claims come from hygienists.

"It's rising but very slowly," says Marilee Mark, vice-president of marketing for group benefits at Manulife Financial. "It's by no means very significant in terms of our overall [business]. It's just under 1%."

Manulife, however, has only been accepting hygienist claims since last June so the jury is still out on how successful independent hygienist will be. Ms. Mark notes the fee guide for hygienists is lower and that will mean obvious savings for people without insurance but could lower costs for employers who sponsor plans.

The main problem with seeing a hygienist for teeth cleaning and a dentist for more specialized care such as X-rays and cavities is overlap. "If go see a hygienist for an assessment, the plan will pay for it but if you have to go on to a dentist and they do another assessment, your plan is not going to pay for that," Ms. Mark says.

That is part of the argument the Ontario Dental Association has made for keeping hygienists in the dental office. "In a dental office, you have your checkup. Are you getting the same checkup in independent hygiene centre as a dental office that may or not use a hygienist," says Dr. Larry Levin, president of the ODA. "The answer is no . A hygienist can look at gum health but only a dentist can look at hard and soft tissue."

Joanne Multari, vice-president of operations and co-owner of Independent Dental Hygiene, says there is no reason for the overlap and dentists will have to learn to accept the initial diagnosis of a hygienist.

Ultimately, the company would like to provide capital to hygienists so they can set up their own practices. She estimates the cost of doing that is about \$100,000, compared to setting up a dental practice, which costs \$225,000.

"I think we're going to be good for dentists. We are going to get more people out for their teeth and that is going to lead to more business for dentists [through referrals]," Ms. Multari says.

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