



## Hygienists offering oral care alternative

**But dental group has concerns over health**

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When Mark Cameron split up with his partner he not only lost a mate, he lost his dental coverage.

For over a year, the 44-year-old self-employed Toronto man couldn't spare the cash to visit a dentist. He didn't have insurance, so when he heard he could go to a storefront clinic to get his teeth cleaned by a hygienist, he thought that was a more affordable option.



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR  
Dental hygienist Amina Zaidi works with patient Mark Cameron at the Independent Dental Hygiene Centres on Yonge St., south of Eglinton Ave.

Cameron was drawn in by the advertisement of a \$99 "introductory" offer that covered an initial assessment, complete cleaning, plaque removal and intra-oral camera photos and polishing.

"The introductory price – you can't beat that," said Cameron as he stood inside the Independent Dental Hygiene Centres on Yonge St., just south of Eglinton Ave. "I needed work done and so many of these issues do come down to price."

In July, the Independent Dental Hygiene Centres opened. Other clinics like it are beginning to dot the province. Of the 9,309 dental hygienists registered to practise in Ontario, 50 say they have independent practices and more are coming, said Margaret Carter, executive director of the Ontario Dental Hygienists' Association.

After years of resistance from many dentists, on Sept. 1, 2007, the Ontario government passed an amendment to the Dental Hygiene Act, enabling hygienists to clean teeth without an order from dentists, effectively allowing them to set up shop on their own.

Advocates pushed for the change, arguing that the poor and elderly in nursing homes as well as those who are housebound will benefit from regular teeth cleaning performed by hygienists at a lower cost.

Generally, the hygienist's fees are 30 per cent less than what the dentists are recommended to charge in their fee guide, Carter said. Dentists generally charge at least \$150 for a cleaning, although that includes a dentist consultation.

Toronto Public Health's Dr. Hazel Stewart, director of dental and oral health services, said it's still early to gauge the impact. "It all depends on the costs, of course," she said yesterday. "It is yet to be seen if there is a significant difference in cost and (if it) will allow poor people to access dental hygiene service."

Ironically, two dentists – Drs. Brian Price and Howard Rocket – are behind the Independent Dental Hygiene Centres.

"So many people are not getting their teeth cleaned on a regular basis and what are the barriers?" Price said. "Cost. Convenience. And the fact that you have people who do not want to see the dentist."

"If I was practising dentistry right now I don't think I'd lobby the government and say 'this isn't good for the public' when in fact it is going on and hygienists are practising on their own when dentists are playing golf on Wednesdays and Fridays."

The Ontario Dental Association sees things differently. "Do I think the patient is better cared for by going to two different places to have their work done?" asked Dr. Larry Levin, president of the ODA. "No, I'm a strong supporter of collaboration." Levin, a practising dentist in Hamilton, is concerned patients might not be aware of what they are getting when they go to an independent clinic. Dentists perform a careful examination, X-rays if needed and an oral cancer examination, he said. Hygienists are part of the team, he added, seeing the patient to assess gum health, report problems to the dentist, clean teeth and review oral hygiene practices.

If patients think they are getting the whole package when they just visit a hygienist, they are mistaken, Levin said: "All they are getting is the cleaning."