

Oral health partnerships in long-term care: The Bruyère experience

The importance of oral health for seniors

There is growing awareness around the importance of oral care for overall health. Long-term care (LTC) residents are particularly vulnerable to a number of risk factors for poor oral health that can lead to oral bacterial disease, bad breath, mouth sores and pneumonia. It can also be difficult for many residents to access a traditional dental office due to transportation, physical and financial limitations. Improving access to oral care resources within a residence is one way to reduce oral health care barriers.

Establishing partnerships with the dental hygiene community can bring oral health expertise on-site. Dental hygienists in Ontario are independent health care providers whose scope of practice includes the assessment of teeth and oral tissues as well as the provision of oral health promotion and care. This brochure describes a partnership between Ottawa's Saint-Louis Residence (SLR) LTC home and the dental hygiene program at La Cité college.

Saint-Louis Residence at a glance:

- Located in the Orléans suburb of Ottawa
- A designated Francophone home with 198 beds
- One of two residences that is part of Bruyère Continuing Care

La Cité at a glance:

- A francophone community college in Ottawa
- Dental Hygiene is one of many programs offered in the School of Health Sciences

How was the partnership established?

Researchers at the Bruyère Research Institute initiated the SLR and La Cité partnership in 2014. They reached out to La Cité professors for support in developing and validating a French version of the Oral Health Assessment Tool (OHAT), the standard assessment tool dental hygienists use. The research team also designed a short bilingual animated video for staff and caregivers on the importance of oral care.

This initial activity as well as the implementation of the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) oral care best practice guidelines set the stage for establishing dental hygiene student placements at SLR. Since 2016, these student placements provide in-house access to ongoing oral health skill building and staff support for completing residents' OHAT assessments.

What was involved in bringing dental hygiene students to a LTC setting?

SLR followed the same orientation process it uses for any student.

Before arriving, all students had to:

- Provide proof of up to date immunizations, police record check, CPR and first aid training
- Read and sign policies related to residents' rights, confidentiality as well as those pertaining to the prevention of violence, abuse and harassment.

Students' schedules and activities were co-ordinated among the care units. This required communication between the student coordinator at SLR, the College instructor, the home's clinical educator, the RNAO Best Practice Spotlight Organisation (BPSO) lead, floor staff and researchers. Information was exchanged and updated through regular staff meetings, BPSO meetings, communication books and emails. It was important that front line staff understood that students were not there to evaluate or judge their care but rather as a valuable resource. Since SLR is part of a teaching organization, students are considered part of the regular circle of care. They are obligated to identify themselves, explain what aspect of care they are there to carry out and respect the resident's response to their presence.

Placement structure and activities

Placement structure: The placement involved 3rd year dental hygiene students as part of their fall semester course on community practice. The placement ran from September to December, 2016 (approximately 15 weeks). A total of 24 students participated. Each attended SLR on at least 2 separate days for approximately 2.5 hours each time. The college course instructor was always on site to support students and usually started each session by doing an assessment or intervention that the students could observe. Students worked in pairs and were supervised by their on-site instructor.

Student activities:

Phase 1 – Knowledge exchange with Registered Nurses (3 student placement days)

As part of the oral care best practice guidelines implementation, all registered nurses (RNs) in the residence knew how to use the OHAT assessment, and the OHAT template had been integrated into the electronic health record. The knowledge exchange between 12 students and six RNs included a demonstration of the OHAT assessment under various situations (e.g. cognitively impaired residents).

Phase 2 – Support for regular oral health care and assessment

Phase 2 involved all 24 students with the goal of supporting daily oral care and assessment. When possible, two students were paired with one personal support worker (PSW) to support the delivery of daily oral care. When this pairing was not feasible due to schedules or workloads, students completed oral care assessments for available and willing residents. They recorded their findings, any oral care follow-up needed, and suggestions to support staff

delivery of daily oral care for the resident's paper chart. The RNs transferred the assessment results into the electronic medical record.

Students carried out Phase 2 activity on all seven of the SLR units with willing and available residents. Ten 2.5-hour time slots were required, for a total of 250 student hours.

Additional education:

The La Cité instructor and students also provided an education session on oral health to family councils with the help of the Champlain Region Family Council Network.

Student-Staff interaction

The students' presence was viewed positively by the long-term care staff. The RN staff involved with Phase 1 reported that they were comfortable using the OHAT assessment tool. After the placements, staff perspectives indicated that it was very important to keep front-line staff informed about student schedules and that reminders about using the students and instructor as a resource were helpful. It was also helpful to use a number of different and ongoing communication methods to reach all staff. Individual unit managers can assist in reinforcing reminders and ensuring that effective and timely staff communication tools are used.

Students' feedback indicated the value of the placement. It showed them how they might make a difference in the future.

"This experience really opened my eyes to how I can make a difference either to other professionals or to people that cannot access a dental clinic." – Student Participant

How did the LTC home benefit?

Saint-Louis Residence benefited from this partnership by gaining access to additional expertise on oral health issues. Working with the staff and students from La Cité improved staff comfort in completing OHAT assessments; high quality assessments are key for better oral health care planning and delivery. Since students could complete many assessments, it also helped to ease staff workload. Residents and families benefited from the dental hygiene professionals' explanation of the potential risks and complications that might arise from particular oral health conditions and could make informed decisions about any recommended follow-up steps.

Another important benefit was that the partnership with La Cité dental hygienists helped to support the implementation of oral health best practice guidelines at SLR. Through these two initiatives, the residence introduced a more accessible and economical denture labeling system. Denture labeling is important to ensure that dentures are never given to the wrong resident.

What can your facility do to promote oral health?

Think about establishing an oral care partnership

If your care home is located far from a dental hygiene educational program, you could consider other ways to partner with the dental community. Reach out to the dental hygiene professional society in your region. This organization is likely to have information on professionals who have an interest in serving seniors or long-term care and can assist your organization in establishing connections. Although dental and dental hygiene professionals work on a fee-for service basis, many are interested in making a difference through professional development and volunteer activities. Inviting a local professional as a guest speaker could also help establish a partnership network for oral health.

Consult broadly about support for oral health promotion

The [RNAO](#) partners with LTC organizations to promote oral health and assist in the adoption of oral care best practice guidelines.

Check with your Local Health Integration Network and your municipality's public health office to find out whether they can be of assistance in supporting an oral health partnership in your organization.

Promote oral health education via organizational communication tools

Use your organization's newsletters and websites to provide staff, residents and families with information of the importance of oral health and resources that they can consult. Family and resident councils are also important forums to tap into. Annual events like health fairs provide another opportunity to invite outside expertise in to share information. Establishing a regular item on oral health matters in your organization's newsletter or website can help to keep oral health on everyone's agenda.

Consult online educational resources

Instead of re-inventing the wheel, consult with online resources that already exist. There are a number of online videos and resources to help staff and family support oral care for residents.

- [Oral Care for Residents with Dementia](#) – RNAO (6-part series)
- [Considerations for Dementia - Tips and Techniques for Providing Oral Care](#)
- [Gentle Persuasive Approach – Improving Dementia Care in Nursing Homes](#) (Centres for Medicare and Medicaid Services)
- [Professional development resources](#) (Alzheimer Society of Canada)
- [Portal of Geriatric Online Education: Oral Hygiene & Care-resistant Behaviors: Making a Difference](#) (Link provided by Alzheimer's Society of Canada)

- [Educational resources on oral health for caregivers and LTC staff produced by dental hygiene students at University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and Morningside Ministries Senior Living Communities](#) (Galicki et al., 2016)
- [Educational videos produced by the Schlegel Centre for Learning, Research and Innovation in LTC as a 13-part series on oral health care for LTC staff](#)
- [Mouth Matters – Importance of Oral Care](#), a short animated video produced by the Bruyère Centre for Learning, Research and Innovation in LTC
French version : [Santé de la bouche - L'hygiène buccodentaire est essentielle](#)
- Grant, T. (2017) *Partnerships for Oral Health in LTC: A scoping review of the literature focusing on dental hygiene students and alternative models of dental hygiene partnerships*. Prepared for the Bruyère Centre for Learning, Research and Innovation in LTC, this resource is available upon request (info@clri-ltc.ca).

Supported with funding from the Government of Ontario through the Bruyère Centre for Learning, Research and Innovation in Long-Term Care. The views expressed in this document are the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the province.

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