

NCOHR WORKING PAPER SERIES

Why was dental care excluded from Canadian Medicare?

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Lay Summary

This paper examines the factors that played a role in determining why dental care was excluded from Canada's national system of health insurance (Medicare). Internationally, health policy analysts are often surprised that Canadian Medicare does not include dental care. Recently, many Canadians have also expressed concern that dental care is not included in Medicare. Examining the historical reasons for why dental care was excluded from Medicare can inform current domestic and international policy debates on dental care. This study found five interrelated reasons for why dental care was not incorporated into Medicare. These reasons can be classified as legislative, professional, socio-cultural, economic, and epidemiological. Essentially, dental care was not included because of the significant decreases in dental caries that were observed, and the limitations in dental human resources that were present, as the country's health legislation was taking shape. This was coupled to the introduction of community water fluoridation, which was a more cost-effective alternative option to large-scale treatment services, and to the belief that brushing one's teeth was largely an individual responsibility, not a social one. Reflecting on these historical reasons provides an important perspective for current international and domestic efforts at expanding public support for dental care.

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