

Dentistry and Related Fields

Includes:

- Dental assistant
- Dental hygienist
- Dental laboratory technician
- Dentist

History

From the early 1940s until 1975, the American Dental Association's (ADA's) Council on Dental Education was the agency recognized as the national accrediting organization for dentistry and

dental-related educational programs. In 1975, this accreditation authority was transferred to the Commission on Accreditation of Dental and Dental Auxiliary Educational Programs, an expanded agency established to provide representation of all groups affected by its accrediting activities. In 1979, the name of the Commission was changed to the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA). The accreditation standards for educational programs in dental assisting, dental hygiene, and dental laboratory technology have been revised several times over the years to reflect the dental profession's changing needs and educational trends.

Dental Assistant

The dental assistant increases the efficiency of the dental care team by aiding the dentist in the delivery of oral health care. The dental assistant performs a wide range of tasks requiring both interpersonal and technical skills. Duties range from aiding and educating patients to preparing and sterilizing dental instruments and performing administrative work.



History

In 1957, the Council on Dental Education sponsored the first national workshop on dental assisting. Practicing dentists, dental educators, and dental assistants made recommendations for the education and certification of dental assistants. These recommendations were considered in developing the first *Requirements for an Accredited Program in Dental Assisting Education*, which were approved by the ADA House of Delegates in 1960. Prior to 1960, the American Dental Assistants Association (ADAA) approved courses of training for dental assistants, varying in length from 104 clock hours to 2 academic years. Subsequent to the adoption in 1960 of the first accreditation standards, the Council on Dental Education granted provisional approval to those programs approved by the ADAA that were at least 1 academic year in length until site visits could be conducted. Thus, 26 programs appeared on the first list of accredited dental assisting programs published in 1961. As of 2007, 266 programs were accredited.



Job Description

Dental assistants are responsible for:

- Helping patients feel comfortable before, during, and after treatment
- Assisting the dentist during treatment
- Exposing and processing dental radiographs (x-rays) (*Note:* Currently, 31 states require dental assistants to complete additional education and/or examinations to perform this function.)
- Recording the patient's medical history and taking blood pressure and pulse
- Preparing and sterilizing instruments and equipment for the dentist's use
- Providing patients with oral care instructions following such procedures as surgery or placement of a restoration (filling)
- Teaching patients proper brushing and flossing techniques

- Making impressions of patients' teeth for study casts (*Note:* Most states consider this to be an expanded function, requiring additional education and/or examination to perform it.)
- Performing administrative and scheduling tasks, including using a personal computer, communicating by telephone, and maintaining an inventory supply system.
- Many states provide a career ladder for dental assistants, allowing them to perform expanded functions, most often with additional education, examinations, and/or credentials. The Dental Assisting National Board (DANB) provides state-specific information on dental assisting requirements and which duties they are allowed to perform; see: www.danb.org.



Employment Characteristics

Most of the more than 247,000 active dental assistants are employed by general dentists. In addition, dental specialists employ dental assistants. Most assistants work chairside, although they may also participate in the business aspects of the practice. Besides dental offices, other employment settings available to dental assistants include:

- Schools and clinics (public health dentistry)
- Hospitals (assisting dentists who are treating bedridden patients or in more elaborate dental procedures performed only in hospitals)
- Dental school clinics
- Insurance companies (processing dental insurance claims)
- Vocational schools, technical institutes, community colleges, and universities (teaching others to be dental assistants)

Dental assisting offers both flexibility and stability. Dental assistants have the flexibility to work full or part time. According to DANB's 2008 CDA Salary Survey, those who are Certified Dental Assistants (CDAs) by DANB work in the dental assisting field for an average of 16.7 years, 9.4 years with the same employer dentist.

Excellent career opportunities exist for nontraditional dental assisting students, seeking career change or job reentry after a period of unemployment, or from a culturally diverse background. Many dental assisting education programs offer more flexible program designs that meet the needs of nontraditional students by offering a variety of educational options, such as part-time or evening hours.



Salary

The salary of a dental assistant varies, depending on the responsibilities associated with the specific position, the individual's training, and the geographic location of employment. The average wage for a full-time dental assistant, in all practice settings, is \$18.50 an hour, while full-time dental assistants employed in general dentistry offices earn, on average, \$17.68 an hour (DANB's 2008 CDA Salary Survey, www.danb.org/PDFs/2008SalarySurvey.pdf). Data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2007 shows that wages at the 10th percentile are \$21,550, the 50th percentile (median) at \$31,550, and the 90th percentile at \$44,930 (www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes319091.htm). For more information, refer to www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary.

In addition to salary, dental assistants may receive benefit packages from their employers, including health and disability insurance coverage, dues for membership in professional organizations, an allowance for uniforms, profit sharing plans, and paid vacations.



Employment Outlook

Most areas of the country are currently reporting shortages of dental assistants. Owing to the success of preventive dentistry in reducing the incidence of oral disease, senior citizens—a growing population—will retain their teeth longer and will be even more aware of the importance of regular dental care.



Educational Programs

Length. Nine to 11 months.

Prerequisites. High school diploma or equivalent.



Certification

Dental assistants can become certified by passing the Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) examination, administered by the Dental Assisting National Board (DANB). The CDA exam is comprised of three component exams: Radiation Health and Safety (RHS), Infection Control (ICE), and General Chairside Assisting (GC). Dental assistants are eligible to take this examination if they have completed a dental assisting program accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation, or are high school graduates with 2 years full-time dental assisting work experience, or are a graduate from a dental hygiene or dental program accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation. All those applying to take the CDA exam must hold current CPR certification. Passing all three components of this examination qualifies a dental assistant to use the designation Certified Dental

Assistant (CDA) for a period of 1 year. To maintain the CDA designation, individuals must renew their certification annually by meeting DANB's recertification requirements. Although 37 states currently recognize or require dental assistants to take the CDA exam or one of the CDA component exams, state regulations vary and some states offer registration or licensure in addition to this national certification program.



Inquiries

Careers/Curriculum

American Dental Association
211 E Chicago Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611-2678
312 440-2390
www.ada.org/prof/ed/careers

American Dental Education Association
1400 K Street NW, Suite 1100
Washington, DC 20005
202 289-7201
www.adea.org

American Dental Assistants Association
35 E Wacker Drive, Suite 1730
Chicago, IL 60601
312 541-1550
www.dentalassistant.org

Certification

Dental Assisting National Board, Inc
444 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 900
Chicago, IL 60611
312 642-3368
800 FOR-DANB (367-3262)
312 642-1475 Fax
www.danb.org

Program Accreditation

Commission on Dental Accreditation
American Dental Association
211 E Chicago Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611-2678
312 440-4653
312 440-2915 Fax
www.ada.org