

Dental careers

Dental Assistants

Dental assistants work with dentists as they examine and treat patients. The assistant makes the patient comfortable, prepares him for the treatment and obtains his records. The assistant hands the dentist his instruments, and keeps the patient's mouth clear. They prepare materials for making impressions and restorations, take and process X-rays, and provide oral health instruction.

Many dental assistants learn their skills on the job. An increasing number are trained in community colleges or vocational schools. Most programs take one year to complete, but others are two-year programs that lead to an Associate degree.

High school students interested in careers as dental assistants should take courses in biology, chemistry, health, typing and office practices.

Dental Hygienist

Dental hygienists are oral health clinicians and educators who help the public develop and maintain good oral health. Dental hygienists perform preventive and therapeutic services under the supervision of the dentist which can include cleaning teeth; instructing on hygiene and nutrition; applying fluoride; taking X-rays; taking dental and medical histories.

Dental hygienists must be licensed, and must graduate from an accredited dental hygiene school and pass examinations.

Completion of an Associate degree program is usually sufficient to practice in a private dental office but a four-year degree is often required to teach, work in schools or public health programs.

Curriculum consists of such subjects as anatomy, physiology, chemistry, pharmacology, nutrition, histology, periodontology (the study of gum diseases), dental materials and clinical hygiene.

People who want to become dental hygienists should enjoy working with others, be neat and clean, have good manual dexterity and good health. High school students should study biology, chemistry, health, math and speech.

Behavioral Sciences

The Oregon School of Dentistry is one of two units in the country conducting research on bruxism, habitual grinding of teeth. The project uses a specially designed muscle activity recorder and uses hypnosis as an important part of the treatment to modify the habit present in an estimated 20 percent of the population.

Oral surgery

New techniques are being used in the School of Dentistry to reconstruct jaws. Using the new treatment oral surgeons can reconstruct large portions of the jaw even when there has been radiation treatment. A new dacron mesh tray replaces the use of metal or bone transplants. The tray has an adaptable shape allowing the surgeon to fill it with bone marrow that solidifies quickly.



Shalee Doyle, dental hygienist at Albina Human Resource Center, treats young patient.

(Photo: Richard J. Brown)

Dental Laboratory Technicians

Do you ever wonder where false teeth come from? Well, they come from the skills of a Dental Lab Technician. Besides making dentures, they develop porcelain crowns, bridges and dental orthodontic appliances. Their tools are small hand instruments such as wax spatulas and carvers. They also utilize electric lathes, drills, high-heat furnaces, metal-melting torches and other specialized laboratory equipment.

In 1978, there were 47,000 persons in this profession. Most work is in commercial laboratories, either as employees or as owners of the business. However, a few large laboratories employ over 200 technicians.

About 8,500 dental laboratory technicians work in dentists' offices. Others work for hospitals that provide dental services for the Federal Government.

Although no minimum formal education is needed to enter this occupation, a high school diploma is an asset. Many learn their craft through on-the-job training. Among the personal qualifications that employers look for in selecting trainees are a high degree of manual dexterity, good color perception, patience and an inclination for detailed work. High School students interested in careers in this occupation are advised to take courses in art, crafts, metal shop, metallurgy and science.

Job opportunities for well-qualified dental laboratory technicians are expected to excellent throughout the 1980s. Employment is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations due to the expansion of dental prepayment plans and the increasing number of older people who require dentures. In addition to job opportunities created by growth, many openings will occur each year because of the need to replace technicians who die or retire.



Health Careers

Health careers are among the most rapidly growing career fields. Not all health careers are in hospitals or clinics; there are over 200 careers related to health and only nine out of every 100 health care workers are physicians.

Health careers cover every talent and interest. Some require as little as three months on-the-job training while others demand years of study.

The health field offers the opportunity to help others, personal satisfaction, active involvement, steady income, good fringe benefits, advancement opportunities and job availability.

Among the health careers are:

Dispensing optician: Opticians fill eye glass prescriptions made by optometrists or ophthalmologists.

Medical records technician: Files all patients' records.

Medical laboratory workers: Prepare "media" for specimens; aids medical technologist. Cytotechnologists screen microscopic tissue samples for cancer. Histologic technicians cut and stain tissues for study.

EEG technician: Uses an EEG machine to measure patients' brain waves.

Dietetic technician: Writes patients' diet history and helps patients select food for required diets.

Radiologic technician: Takes and develops X-rays.

Respiratory technician: Uses lung-testing equipment to diagnose and treat heart-lung problems.

One of the most exciting aspects of health careers is research. Since 1957, when Oregon's first open heart surgery was performed at the Oregon Health Sciences University Hospital, advances made or used in that hospital have benefited thousands of patients with sick hearts.

In 1964, Dr. Charles Dotter saved a woman's leg using a catheter of his own design to open a blocked artery. Now OHSU's cardiologists Drs. Mark Morton and John McNulty are using balloon dilatation to avoid surgery.

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