Dental Assistant

A Dental Assistant is an integral member of the dental health team, competent via education, experience, and understanding of patient welfare. The Dental Assistant is qualified to provide support in administrative duties: chairside, laboratory, and radiological procedures, as defined by existing state laws. As an agent of the Dentist, the Dental Assistant strives to cultivate good will and confidence within the dental practice.

Nature of the Work

Dental Assistants perform a variety of patient care, office and laboratory duties. They are different than Dental Hygienists, who must be licensed to perform different clinical tasks. They can perform the following duties:

• Work chairside as dentists examine and treat patients
• Make patients feel comfortable in dental chair
• Prepare patients for treatment
• Obtain dental records
• Hand instruments to dentists
• Keep patients mouths dry and clear by using suction or other devices
• Sterilize and disinfect instruments and equipment
• Prepare try set-ups for dental procedures
• Instruct patients on postoperative and general oral health care
• May prepare materials for making impressions and restorations
• Expose radiography
• Process dental x-ray film as directed by a dentist
• May remove sutures
• Apply anesthetics to gums or cavity-preventive agents to teeth
• Remove excess cement used in the filling process
• Schedule and confirm appointments
Receive patients

Keep treatment records

Send bills

Receive payments

Order dental supplies and materials

Make casts of teeth and mouth from impressions taken by a dentist (lab duties)

Clean and polish removable appliances and make temporary crowns (lab duties)

Education and Training

Many Dental Assistants learn their skills on the job, but there are many community and junior colleges, trade schools, technical institutions and Armed Forces that offer dental assisting programs.

Dental Assisting programs include: classroom, laboratory, and preclinical instruction in dental assisting skills and related theory. In addition, students may gain practical experience in dental schools, clinics or dental offices. Most programs take less than one year to complete and lead to a certificate or diploma. Two-year programs offered in community or junior colleges lead to an associate degree. All programs require high school diploma or its equivalent and some may require a typing or science course for admission.

Licensure: Some states regulate the duties Dental Assistants through licensure or registration. Licensure or registration may require passing a written or practical examination. States requiring licensure have a list of schools offering courses, usually less than one year in length. Some states require continuing education to maintain licensure.

Employment

Dental assistants held about 303,200 jobs in 2012. Employment of dental assistants is expected to grow by 25 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. Ongoing research linking oral health and general health will continue to increase the demand for preventive dental services. As dental practices grow, more dental assistants will be needed.

Dentists will continue to hire more dental assistants to complete routine tasks, allowing the dentist to see more patients in their practice and spend their time on more complex procedures. As dental practices grow, more dental assistants will be needed.

As the large baby-boom population ages, and as people keep more of their original teeth than did previous generations, the need to maintain and treat teeth will continue to increase the need for dental assistants.

Salary

The median annual wage of dental assistants was $34,500 in May 2012. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $23,550, and the top 10 percent earned more than $47,580.