

Supporting dentists



Above: Dental hygienist Carol Hassall teaching a patient good dental hygiene
Below: Dental plaque and tartar on teeth



Dentists often have assistants working with them, who pass them items in response to cryptic requests and enter mysterious coded data about your teeth on a computer. These dental nurses are part of a team involved in the care of your teeth. What does it take to become a member of the team supporting a dentist?

The dental team includes dental nurses, hygienists, technicians and therapists. Dentists concentrate on treating tooth and gum conditions, but an important part of a dental team's work lies in educating people to care for their mouths and teeth — preventing problems before they arise.

Dental nurses

A dental nurse supports the dentist in all aspects of patient care. This includes getting the appropriate

Box 1 Teeth at risk

Bacteria in our mouths produce an invisible, sticky film called **plaque** which constantly forms on the teeth. Plaque (which is 90% bacteria) is one of the main causes of tooth decay and gum disease. When bacteria in plaque use sugars in food they produce acids which damage tooth enamel and cause tooth decay and cavities. Plaque can also affect the gums, causing diseases such as **gingivitis**. If this is left untreated it can lead to a more serious gum disease called **periodontitis**.

Gingivitis (gum disease) causes the gums to redden, swell slightly and to bleed easily when the teeth are brushed. Provided patients pay greater care and attention to good oral hygiene this can usually be cleared up.

Periodontitis is an advanced state of gingivitis, in which the plaque spreads below the gums and forms a hard deposit called **tartar**. The bacteria in plaque and tartar produce toxins which irritate and inflame the gums. The disease may progress to break down the tissues and bone which support the teeth. Eventually teeth become loose and may have to be extracted.

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instruments ready, mixing materials and ensuring the patient is comfortable. A nurse also take notes dictated by the dentist for the patient's records. Once the patient has left, the nurse tidies the surgery and sterilises all the instruments. A dental nurse may also be involved with administration, working in reception and records, organising suppliers and liaising with specialist laboratories.

You can train to be a dental nurse in several ways. Some dental hospitals and further education colleges run full-time 1 or 2-year courses, leading either to the National Certificate or to the hospital's own exam. If, like most dental nurses, you start your career in general dental practice, you will be able to study in the evenings or on day release. You need no formal academic qualifications to study for the certificate, but some colleges may have their own requirements.

If you want to become a dental hygienist or dental therapist, you may need experience as a dental nurse first.

Dental hygienists

Dental hygienists carry out procedures such as scaling and polishing teeth, and applying topical fluoride and fissure sealants. They also teach patients the necessary skills to carry out their oral hygiene effectively. Most dental hygienists work in community dental services, usually in general dental practice. Hospital-based hygienists also help patients to maintain a healthy mouth when they are having surgery or complicated orthodontic treatment, or if they suffer from particular medical conditions.

Hygienists must be qualified and enrolled with the General Dental Council in order to practise in the UK. To qualify you need to take a full-time 2-year course at a school of dental hygiene. These are based at the dental teaching hospitals and also at the Defence Dental Agency training college. You study anatomy and physiology, preventive dentistry, dental health education, dental pathology and the management and care of patients.

To enter the course you need 5 GCSE subjects graded A-C or equivalent, plus 2 A-levels or a recognised nursing qualification. Competition for places is strong.

Box 2 Useful websites

Further information can be found on these websites:

The British Association of Dental Nurses at

<http://www.badn.org.uk>

The British Dental Hygienists' Association at

<http://www.bdha.org.uk>

The British Association of Dental Therapists at

<http://www.badt.org.uk>

The General Dental Council at

<http://www.gdc-uk.org>

Box 3 Case study: Carol Hassall, dental hygienist

I started my first job at the age of 17 as a dental nurse in my local surgery. The idea of looking into people's mouths was not very appealing but within a week of working alongside a dentist I was enjoying all aspects of the job. It involved taking care of the patients from when they entered the surgery until they left and making them as relaxed as possible by talking to them. There were dental records to keep in order, as well as tasks such as mixing filling materials, preparing and sterilising equipment and instruments, processing X-rays and generally assisting the dentist.

I qualified as a dental surgery assistant and stayed in the job for 6 years, working with dentists, orthodontists and dental hygienists. I did some evening classes and gained more qualifications; then I applied to Birmingham Dental Hospital to train as a dental hygienist.

The training covered all aspects of dentistry and orthodontics, dealing with dental problems caused by anything from cancer to car crashes. We learnt how to work with disabled patients and how to communicate with different age groups, spending time in playgroups and schools and with elderly patients.

The demand for hygienists in general practices is high and there are jobs with hours to suit individual circumstances. You can also work in hospitals, community dental services and the armed forces.

I qualified 20 years ago but each year I update my skills. I still love the job I do. My day is spent cleaning teeth and removing tartar deposits to prevent gum disease but an important part of my role is as a health educator. I am self-employed, working in four different practices, with the support of my own dental assistant.

Dental therapists

Like hygienists, dental therapists have an important role in promoting dental health. They work in all sectors of dentistry including general dental practice.

Dental therapists can carry out more procedures than hygienists, including taking dental X-rays, giving routine fillings in both first and permanent teeth and extracting deciduous (first) teeth under local anaesthetic. Some dental therapists take further training so that they can carry out pulp therapy treatment or place pre-formed crowns on deciduous teeth, providing emergency temporary replacement of crowns and fillings and taking impressions.

Dental therapists must be enrolled by the General Dental Council. They must have a Diploma in Dental Therapy, which is offered by six dental hospitals.

The diploma course takes about 27 months, depending where you study. The course covers preventive dentistry, dental health education, dental pathology, simple restorative procedures for both deciduous and permanent teeth, the extraction of deciduous teeth, radiography and pharmacology. You need 5 GCSE subjects graded A-C or equivalent, plus 2 A-levels or a recognised nursing qualification. Competition for places is strong.

Nigel Collins teaches biology and is an editor of CATALYST. He is grateful to Carol Hassall for taking care of his teeth.

Periodontal means 'around the teeth'.