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Careers in Dentistry

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This resource gives several different career suggestions that may be useful to you as you plan for either your first job or your next job in dentistry.

Of course, before you consider your career path, you'll want to take a moment to consider yourself. Every person has a unique combination of interests, obligations, desires and demands that determine which career choices are the best.

Some personal style questions you may want to consider include:

- **Life Style:** Where do you want to live? Do you dream of backpacking in the wilderness or starting a family? Or maybe you dream of backpacking with your family! How do you plan to balance your professional life with your personal life?
- **Money Style:** What's your plan for repaying student loans? What other financial obligations do you have? Could you secure the financing to open up a practice? Do you need to earn a sizeable income right away or do you have flexibility?
- **Work Style:** Are you happiest as the leader or do you prefer being a valued team player? Do you get energized thinking about payrolls, personnel and payment plans or do you prefer to just practice dentistry without worrying about the business side? Do you like the intimacy of a small office, the excitement of a large organization or something in between?

As you will see, every career choice requires tradeoffs. While you can do *anything* it is unlikely that you'll be able to do *everything*, at least not all at the same time! Take some time to research all of your options, including the ones outlined in this packet, before making one of the biggest decisions of your life.

Associateships

Associateships are a popular choice for new graduates. They offer the chance to hone clinical skills and spend time with an established dentist, all while bringing home a regular paycheck. There are two approaches to associateships; *without* practice equity and *with* practice equity.

Associates *without* practice equity are essentially employees rather than potential partners to the business. Associateship positions may be available working for an individual practice owner in his or her office or as one of many employed dentists in a large group practice setting. This type of employment offers:

- Immediate income (depending on the agreement, it could also include benefits such as paid CE, insurance, vacation and sick time). Changes in the partnership structure can affect agreements with associates.
- No financial risk or initial capital requirements. With reduced risk often comes reduced earning potential.
- The opportunity to observe practice management without taking on management responsibilities. Limited responsibility can also mean a limited ability to effect changes in the dental office.
- Professional teamwork and consultation with shared responsibility for patient coverage. A team approach can mean conflicting opinions about many topics and diplomacy is a valuable skill.

Associates *with* practice equity have the option to "buy in" by investing and become a partner in the practice. Many characteristics are similar to associateships without equity, but

having an equity stake in a practice usually means the potential for a higher income and increased say over management practices over time. This type of employment offers:

- Immediate income (depending on the agreement, it could also include benefits such as paid CE, insurance, vacation and sick time). In the early phase of an associateship with equity, an associate may be treated more like an employee and less like a partner.
- Smaller financial risk compared to solo practice, but a higher risk than no-equity situations.
- Need for capital at the buy-in stage and a willingness to accept a long-term timeline to see increased earnings.
- The opportunity to observe practice management and progressively take on management responsibilities. The senior dentist and associate dentist may disagree about practice management strategies, leading to conflict.
- Professional teamwork and consultation with shared responsibility for patient coverage. A team approach can mean conflicting opinions about many topics. As a partner, staff may rely on your leadership to resolve conflict.

You can learn more by consulting the publication *Associateships: A Guide for Owners and Prospective Associates*. This guide includes sample contracts, tools for assessing compensation, checklists and timelines for those wishing to buy into a practice, and much more. It's available at a discount for members from the ADA at www.adacatalog.org.

Practice Ownership

Interested in owning your own practice? You're not alone. Many dentists and dental students pursue dentistry to exercise maximum control over their careers. According to recent surveys, more than 80% of dentists are in private practice, either as a solo practitioner or as a partner in a group.

A private, solo dental practice offers:

- A high potential income over practice life. It also carries the greatest financial risk.
- A significant asset—the practice—at retirement. This requires large capital expenditures that will take time to transition from liabilities to assets on the practice's balance sheets.
- The highest level of control over all aspects of practice, including the ability to focus on preferred clinical procedures. Of course the most control also means the most responsibility—the buck stops with you!

If you go with a partnership or group practice setting rather than as a solo practitioner, the benefits are similar. In a group practice, though, you would enjoy additional benefits of sharing management responsibilities, professional teamwork, in-house consultation, and shared patient coverage.

To thrive in a solo or group practice environment, you'll need more than just keen dentistry skills—you'll also need entrepreneurial expertise. Managing employees, negotiating contracts, monitoring the cash flow, marketing your practice and more all become the responsibilities of practice owners. The ADA maintains practice management resources online including a free new practice checklist, and tips on everything from infection control to congratulating the dental team for a job well done! Take a look for yourself at www.ada.org, search for *practice resources*.

Hospitals and other Healthcare Organizations

Hospitals, nursing homes, assisted care facilities and other health care institutions may

employ dentists. Many of these programs are multi-disciplinary in nature and dentists work with physicians, nurses, therapists and others to provide care.

These institutions often offer dentists an opportunity to care for more challenging patients in an inter-disciplinary setting.

In addition to interacting with other healthcare professionals on a regular basis, practicing dentistry in a hospital or other healthcare organization offers:

- Immediate income, often including benefits and a retirement plan
- No financial risk or capital requirements. As always, risk and reward are linked so lower financial risks can mean more modest earnings.
- Shared management responsibilities within an institutional setting.
- An opportunity to see many types of patients with varying dental needs, providing experiences not found in the traditional dental office.

Federal Dentistry

Almost 5,000 dentists work for the U.S. Public Health Service, the Department of Veterans' Affairs or the U.S. Military.

The U.S. Public Health Service is a commissioned corps of uniformed dental officers, serving in the Indian Health Service, U.S. Coast Guard, Federal Bureau of Prisons and the National Health Service Corps.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs serves the healthcare needs of military veterans.

Military dentists may serve in the U.S. or overseas, contributing to the readiness of military personnel.

Practicing as a federal dentist offers:

- Salaried positions and excellent benefits, including paid vacation/days, leave with pay, continuing education, sick time and insurance. Signing bonuses and/or loan repayment programs may be available. Federal dentists are frequently vested in retirement plans in a relatively short time.
- No financial risk or capital requirements.
- The opportunity to practice with experienced dentists and dental team members in a group practice setting.
- Dentists may serve for a fairly short period of time – as little as three years – or make an entire career in the federal services.
- Both clinical and non-clinical activity, including increased management responsibility and non-clinical duties related to the federal career.
- Exceptional continuing education -- Military branches offer opportunities to complete a general practice residency or specialty training as part of their military service.
- The possibility of frequent relocations
- The opportunity to serve one's country

The ADA is committed to serving those who serve as Federal Dentists. Go to ADA.org/fds for information about the federal services and to find more information about special publications, legislative accomplishments and other resources to support personal and professional success in the Federal Dental Services.

Local and State Government

At the local government level, dentists may work for a county public health department to provide care to low income and at-risk communities. Dentists employed at the state level often have fewer clinical responsibilities and instead focus on the administrative end of public health services. At the state level, dentists may find themselves collecting and analyzing data about the oral health of the state's residents and making recommendations about the allocation of resources.

Dentists who work for governments at the local or state level experience many of the same pleasures and challenges as dentists who work in a traditional employment environment. Additionally, changes in the political or legislative environment can impact these positions. If the policy side of dentistry interests you, consider the state government option. Many dentists working in the public policy arena have a Masters in Public Health (MPH) in addition to a DDS or DMD.

Public health dentists have a special interest organization—the American Association of Public Health Dentistry—that provides resources and support. Learn more at www.aaphd.org.

Dental Education

Did you know that a majority of dental school faculty enjoy the best of both worlds? In addition to researching, teaching, and mentoring the next generation of dentists, many faculty members continue to see patients in a clinical setting.

Dentists working in an academic setting earn competitive salaries and have many of the same experiences as dentists in other employment situations. A few things make working in education unique:

- Dental school faculty often receive exceptional benefits, including paid vacation, paid sick time, health insurance, retirement plans, life insurance, malpractice insurance, continuing education, and disability insurance.
- Faculty members are expected to produce scholarly articles and/or research results that are subsequently published in academic journals and peer-reviewed publications. Dental schools differ in this regard, with some institutions more focused on research and publishing than others.
- Dental school faculty members are committed to not just the practice of dentistry but also the future of dentistry. Dental education is the foundation of the knowledge, science, critical thinking and ethical principles that are necessary for the continued well-being of the profession.

Dental education professionals have a specialty organization—the American Dental Education Association. You'll find a number of resources, including job listings, fellowships and loan repayment programs online at www.adea.org.

DDS or DMD—What's the Difference?

DDS — doctor of dental surgery

DMD — doctor of dental medicine

Indicates the degree awarded upon graduation from dental school to become a general dentist. There is no difference between the two degrees; dentists who have a DMD or DDS have the same education. Universities have the prerogative to determine what degree is awarded. Both degrees use the same curriculum requirements set by the American Dental Association's Commission on Dental Accreditation. Generally, three or more years of undergraduate education plus four years of dental school is required to graduate and

become a general dentist. State licensing boards accept either degree as equivalent, and both degrees allow licensed individuals to practice the same scope of general dentistry.

Dental Specialties and Residencies

Most dentists are general practitioners, but about 20% are specialists. The ADA recognizes nine specialties:

- **Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery:** Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery is the specialty of dentistry which includes the diagnosis, surgical and adjunctive treatment of diseases, injuries and defects involving both the functional and esthetic aspects of the hard and soft tissues of the oral and maxillofacial region. American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons, www.aaoms.org
- **Orthodontics and Dentofacial Orthopedics:** Orthodontics and Dentofacial Orthopedics is the dental specialty that includes the diagnosis, prevention, interception, and correction of malocclusion, as well as neuromuscular and skeletal abnormalities of the developing or mature orofacial structures. American Association of Orthodontists, www.braces.org
- **Endodontics:** Endodontics is the branch of dentistry which is concerned with the morphology, physiology and pathology of the human dental pulp and periradicular tissues. Its study and practice encompass the basic and clinical sciences including biology of the normal pulp, the etiology, diagnosis, prevention and treatment of diseases and injuries of the pulp and associated periradicular conditions. The American Association of Endodontists, www.aae.org
- **Periodontics:** Periodontics is that specialty of dentistry which encompasses the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases of the supporting and surrounding tissues of the teeth or their substitutes and the maintenance of the health, function and esthetics of these structures and tissues. American Academy of Periodontology, www.perio.org
- **Prosthodontics:** Prosthodontics is the dental specialty pertaining to the diagnosis, treatment planning, rehabilitation and maintenance of the oral function, comfort, appearance and health of patients with clinical conditions associated with missing or deficient teeth and/or oral and maxillofacial tissues using biocompatible substitutes. The American College of Prosthodontists, www.prosthodontics.org
- **Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology:** Oral Pathology is the specialty of dentistry and discipline of pathology that deals with the nature, identification, and management of diseases affecting the oral and maxillofacial regions. It is a science that investigates the causes, processes, and effects of these diseases. The practice of oral pathology includes research and diagnosis of diseases using clinical, radiographic, microscopic, biochemical, or other examinations. American Academy of Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology www.aaomp.org
- **Oral and Maxillofacial Radiology:** Oral and Maxillofacial Radiology is the specialty of dentistry and discipline of radiology concerned with the production and interpretation of images and data produced by all modalities of radiant energy that are used for the diagnosis and management of diseases, disorders and conditions of the oral and maxillofacial region. American Academy of Oral and Maxillofacial

Radiology www.aaomr.org

- **Pediatric Dentistry:** Pediatric Dentistry is an age-defined specialty that provides both primary and comprehensive preventive and therapeutic oral health care for infants and children through adolescence, including those with special health care needs. American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, www.aapd.org
- **Public Health Dentistry:** Dental public health is the science and art of preventing and controlling dental diseases and promoting dental health through organized community efforts. It is that form of dental practice which serves the community as a patient rather than the individual. It is concerned with the dental health education of the public, with applied dental research, and with the administration of group dental care programs as well as the prevention and control of dental diseases on a community basis. American Association of Public Health Dentistry, www.aaphd.org

AEGD and GPR Programs

The Advanced Education in General Dentistry (AEGD) program provides advanced training in clinical dentistry and applied basic sciences. It is a planned, sequential post-doctoral training program specifically designed to meet the needs of recent graduates who want to enhance their skills as general practitioners. The program is an advanced supplement to the predoctoral dental curriculum, not a continuation of that training. The specific objectives of the program are to enhance competence and confidence in the various clinical disciplines that are integral components of dentistry. AEGD graduates should have a broader base of knowledge and experience to facilitate judgments in diagnosis, treatment planning, and decision making during treatment. Completion of an AEGD program can help to better prepare the dentist to evaluate patients' total oral health needs, provide a full range of general dental care, and refer patients, when indicated, to appropriate specialists. The AEGD program also increases the understanding of practice administration through hands-on experience in this area. The majority of AEGD programs are one year, although several programs offer two-year positions with a primary objective of training academicians.

The General Practice Residency (GPR) program is designed for advanced clinical and didactic training in general dentistry with intensive hospital experience at the postdoctoral level. GPR programs provide instruction and experience in the delivery of care to a wide range of ambulatory and hospitalized patients. This training and exposure prepares dentists to obtain privileges at local hospitals once in private practice. Most GPR programs are sponsored by either a hospital or a hospital affiliated institution such as a dental school. GPR residents rotate through a variety of services including general medicine, general surgery and anesthesiology. Each program also includes advanced training and clinical experience in preventive dentistry, periodontics, restorative dentistry, endodontics, and oral surgery. Training in orthodontics and pediatric dentistry is desirable but not mandatory for GPR programs. The majority of the resident's experience is gained in the direct delivery of oral health care to ambulatory patients. The remaining time may be spent in the operating room involved with inpatient services, as well as the emergency room. Time is also devoted to non-dental services, such as lectures, conferences, and seminars. GPR programs can be one or two years in length, the majority being one year. Fellowships are sometimes available to serve as a third non-accredited year of training in a specific field of interest.

Both AEGD and GPR award a post-graduate certificate upon completion. The major distinction between the AEGD and GPR programs is the emphasis that the AEGD program places on clinical dentistry in contrast to the emphasis on medical management in the GPR program.

ADA Advanced Education Program Search Engine

Using drop-down menus, you can search for information on accredited postdoctoral general dentistry programs or advanced specialty programs in the United States by state and/or discipline. www.ada.org/5502.aspx

The ADA's Survey of Advanced Dental Education This survey provides names of program directors, application deadlines, starting dates, program lengths, certificates or degrees awarded, stipends, and tuition fees of each accredited Advanced Education Program. Visit ADA.org and search for *Survey of Advanced Dental Education*.

The American Student Dental Association (ASDA) publishes a series of guides to post-doctoral options. The guides profile various programs and residencies, including information about application deadlines, stipends, starting dates, faculty, patient mix and other details that facilitate good decision-making. Visit ASDA's Web site at www.asdanet.org to purchase this resource..

The ADA

It's good to remember that a dental career path may incorporate hills and turns but almost no dead ends. Congratulations on choosing such a flexible profession!

Much of the accumulated wisdom of dental career options has been collected in publications, available online at www.adacatalog.org. All the titles listed below, along with many others on a wide range of topics, are available at discounted prices to members:

Valuing a Practice: A Guide for Dentists

Practice Options for the New Dentist: A How-To Guide

The ADA supports you at every step along the way. Whether online at ADA.org or on the phone at 800-621-8099, the ADA can help you to gather the resources you need to accomplish your goals!

Additional Resources:
Dental Career Options
ADA.org/beadentist

Contact Information for Dental Specialty Associations
ADA.org/493.aspx