Something to Smile About
Careers in the Dental Profession

Dentistry

ADA American Dental Association®
America’s leading advocate for oral health
I’ve been interested in dentistry since fifth grade. Originally I was the model dental patient and just fascinated by teeth. Now, I’ve also come to realize what a great profession it really is! I love that I’ll be able to get to know my patients over the long term, have my own practice and make time to pursue other interests. Dentistry offers flexible hours, combines art and science, and allows you to work solo or with partners.

Natalia Sanchez
Dental Student
University of Connecticut
School of Dental Medicine
Why should you choose a career in dentistry?

Dentistry offers exciting career options. In addition to private practice, excellent opportunities exist in teaching, research, careers with government agencies or in industry.

**Private Practice:** Many dentists work either in solo private practice or in partnerships with other dentists. The majority of private practice dentists own their own practices.

**Academic Dentistry:** An academic dentistry career combines teaching, research, community service and patient care. Faculty members work in an intellectually stimulating and exciting environment. Career opportunities for academic dentists are excellent at this time. Additional information is available at the American Dental Education Association’s (ADEA) website, [adea.org](http://adea.org).

**Public Health Dentistry:** This career focuses on community settings rather than private practice. Promoting dental health, developing health policy and preventing disease are the major roles of a public health dentist. Many opportunities exist in comprehensive public health clinics for underserved communities. The U.S. Public Health Service offers dentists an opportunity to provide dental care in unique cultural environments (e.g., an Indian reservation, coast guard base, or federal prison).

**Research:** Research careers offer opportunities to generate new knowledge and be on the cutting edge of scientific discoveries that ultimately impact patient care. Some of the latest research improving patient care includes lasers in surgery, implants to replace damaged bone and computerized x-rays. Many researchers are faculty at universities while others work in federal facilities, such as the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR), [www.nidcr.nih.gov](http://www.nidcr.nih.gov), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), [nih.gov](http://nih.gov), or in private industry. A career in research requires an advanced degree or additional training beyond the dental degree.

“... It has been a goal of mine to work with those most in need — particularly working with American Indians and Alaskan Natives. I travel by plane to villages, set up my equipment and then arrange my schedule to start providing dental services much needed by the people of the community. Screening and providing preventive care to children in schools is a priority of the village visits. Much time is spent teaching and educating about proper oral care, nutrition and dangers of sugary soft drinks.

Dr. DezBaa Damon
Staff Dentist
Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) Dental Clinic

[Image of Dr. DezBaa Damon]
There is a certain thrill of discovering something new, especially after working out a complex experimental design and then validating the experiments. Research is no longer done by individuals; much of the research that we do is interdisciplinary and it’s exciting to work with researchers from other scientific areas. It is even more of a thrill when a discovery leads to a marketed product that will lead to improved dental procedures or improved oral healthcare outcomes.

Dr. Gary E. Schumacher  
Associate Director/Chief, Clinical Research  
Paffenbarger Research Center

International Health Care: Dentists provide services to populations abroad and work for such agencies as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Many dentists volunteer to bring dentistry to aid people in developing countries.

Hospital Dentistry: Hospital dentists treat patients with medical conditions and disabilities alongside physician colleagues, often in operating rooms and emergency departments. Hospital dentists usually have a strong interest in medicine and collaborative care and have spent a year or more training in a hospital-based setting after dental school.
Why dentistry needs you?

- A second-grader, living on an Indian Reservation misses the eighth day of school because of dental pain from untreated dental cavities.
- A ten-year-old, who has very limited access to dental care dies from an abscessed tooth that has been left untreated for a very long time.

These are just some of the examples demonstrating the critical need in many underserved communities where minority and disadvantaged people are not getting the care they need. The lack of access to dental care is becoming an epidemic — especially if one is African American, Hispanic or American Indian. While these groups make up 12% of students going to dental school, Hispanics, African Americans and American Indians make up 30% of the general population now and 50% by 2050.

Recent data shows that minority patients are more likely to see a dentist on a regular basis who shares their language and culture — increasing the need for minority dentists. Along with the fact that the number of minority students going into dental school is not increasing significantly, only 9% of the 181,000 practicing dentists are African American, Hispanic or American Indian, making the crisis even more difficult.

“I feel very lucky to be in this profession! My experience in dental school has been enriching and full of learning experiences. As a fourth-year dental student, I’ve had leadership opportunities with several dental organizations including the Hispanic Dental Association and the American Dental Association. I am eager to provide dental care for underserved communities and I plan to work in the public health care system soon. My background has opened BIG doors for me and I expect great success as a Hispanic dentist in the near future.”

Maria Alma Martinez
Dental Student
University of Pittsburgh
School of Dental Medicine
Dental pain and dental issues can become quite serious and I’ve seen it come to the point of affecting overall health. It’s very satisfying to provide a service to someone who needs it so badly. I really feel like I’m doing a great service for the people here.

Dr. Gwen Werner
Dentist
Indian Health Service

(Summer 2010 issue of Mouth, American Student Dental Association).

Oral Health in America: Surgeon General Report

There is a lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the oral health workforce. Efforts to recruit members of minority groups to health research and practice result in more equitable distribution of care providers.

Some facts:

- For African Americans, Hispanics and American Indians, dental care is the most unmet health need.
- Only 1 in 5 children covered by Medicaid received the preventive oral care for which they are eligible.
- The greatest racial and ethnic disparity among children 2-4 years old and 6-8 years old is seen in Hispanic and African American children.
Scientists are investigating ways to grow teeth in the future through biotechnology research.

Emerging research suggests an increasing number of links between oral and systemic health (mouth-body connections).

Gene therapy and biotechnology research studies will offer patients exciting new options to preserve their smiles.

Saliva may be the new diagnostic tool of the future and key to understanding a person’s overall health.

Dentists are often the first healthcare providers to recognize a number of illnesses — including cancer and cardiovascular problems.

Improved new dental materials and equipment promise to enhance patient smiles and self esteem.

I feel extremely fortunate to be a part of a profession that can help people in so many different ways, ranging from relieving pain to improving someone’s confidence in their smile. Also, since I am Latino, I can provide competent care to patients that often experience language barriers. Dentistry is a stimulating profession that also provides you with opportunities to specialize and become a leader in your community.

Jesus Isaac Patiño, Jr.
Dental Student
University of California, San Francisco School of Dentistry
I knew financing a dental education would be a major undertaking. I investigated and applied for many scholarships including the National Health Service Corps which covers approximately 80% of the cost of professional school, provides a monthly stipend and carries with it a service commitment of up to 4 years in an underserved area.

My home institution offered me an underrepresented minority scholarship through alumni fund contributions. The Health Legacy of Cleveland, a local non-profit organization, awarded me an annual scholarship as its recipients are graduates of the local area high schools who are studying to become physicians and dentists intending to return to the local area to practice. Also, I was awarded a one-time scholarship from the Congressional Black Caucus.

I thank the National Health Service Corps, Case Western Reserve University, the Health Legacy of Cleveland and Congressional Black Caucus for helping to make my dreams of becoming a pediatric dentist a reality.

I look forward to serving the underserved and the nation’s youngest consumers of dental services.

Dr. Kari Cunningham
Pediatric Dental Resident
Case School of Dental Medicine

Can you afford dental school?

Yes. Most dental students cover educational expenses through loan programs, scholarships and grants. Financial assistance programs are available for those who qualify. Information about how to pay for dental school as well as scholarships for underrepresented minority students is available at ada.org/student.

Where can you find a mentor to help guide you in getting into dental school?

You can get the scoop about going to dental school from “student ambassadors,” dental students across the country involved in reaching out to fellow students. Contacting a “student ambassador” can help you find out about dentistry from the viewpoint of a dental student.

To connect with a “student ambassador” in your area, contact the American Dental Association’s Career Guidance at 312.440.2390.

You can also consider job shadowing at several dental offices to view dentistry from the other side of the chair and find out about all the options dentistry offers.

For more information about job shadowing, contact the ADA to find a dentist in your area at ada.org/mentoring.
The majority of the 181,000 practicing dentists today are general dentists. Becoming a general dentist requires 4 years of dental education. Approximately 20% of practicing dentists are dental specialists who limit their practices to one of the nine ADA recognized dental specialties: Dental Public Health, Endodontics, Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology, Oral and Maxillofacial Radiology, Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, Orthodontics and Dentofacial Orthopedics, Pediatric Dentistry, Periodontics and Prosthodontics.

Additional information on the nine specialties is available under Dental Specialties at ada.org/student. In addition to four years of dental school, two or more additional years of dental specialty education are required.
Where can you find more information?

The Predental Timeline for college students (Freshman–Senior Year), available under Be a Dentist at ada.org/student, highlights tips on getting into dental school such as when to take the Dental Admission Examination (DAT) and the benefits of joining a predental club at your campus.

Career Guidance, American Dental Association
312.440.2390
ada.org/careers

For Additional Information

American Dental Education Association (ADEA)
202.289.7201
adea.org
Opportunities for Minority Students in the United States Dental Schools and Official Guide to Dental Schools
(These publications are available for purchase from ADEA)

American Student Dental Association (ASDA)
312.440.2795
asdanet.org
Information and resources from the largest national student run organization for students pursuing a career in dentistry, including the handbook: Getting into Dental School: ASDA’s Guide for Predental Students
(This publication is free to all predental ASDA members)

Hispanic Dental Association (HDA)
800.852.7921
hdassoc.org
Information on the national organization of dental professionals involved in promoting and improving the oral health of the Hispanic community and providing advocacy for Hispanic oral health professionals across the United States.

National Association of Advisors for the Health Profession (NAAHP)
217.355.0063
naahp.org/advisors.htm
Information for students exploring or planning a career in the health professions including locating a college health professions advisor and the helpful, supportive role of the health professions advisor.

National Dental Association (NDA)
202.588.1697
ndaonline.org
Organization dedicated to serving as advocates in the public arena and private sector to increase access to care for underserved. Involved in recruiting underrepresented minorities into the profession and improving the educational opportunities of minorities underrepresented in the oral health field.

Society of American Indian Dentists (SAID)
aaip.org/?page=SAID
National organization promotes dental health in the American Indian community; encourages American Indian youth to pursue a career in the profession of dentistry; serves as a resource for assistance to American Indian students interested in the profession of dentistry.

Society of American Indian Dentists at the Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health (SAID-ASDOH)
atsu.edu/orgs/said
Student Chapter of the Society of American Indian Dentist promotes the recruitment and retention of American Indian students into dental school and encourages the students to return to their American Indian communities to practice their dental profession. Provides specific resources for American Indian students including mentoring opportunities.

Student National Dental Association (SNDA)
sndanet.org
Student dental organization made up of students from African–American, Hispanic, and American Indian backgrounds with the goal of improving the minority health manpower distribution among the minority populations.

Summer Medical Dental Education Program (SMDEP)
smdep.org
A free (full tuition, housing, and meals) six-week summer medical and dental school preparatory program that offers eligible students personalized medical and dental school preparation including intensive academic enrichment.