

Careers in dentistry

Learn more about dental laboratory technology

If you like doing precision work with your hands, enjoy working independently and are interested in the health care field, a career as a dental laboratory technician may be right for you.

WHAT DOES A DENTAL LABORATORY TECHNICIAN DO?

Dental technicians are an important part of the dental care team. They work with materials that replace damaged or missing tooth structure. They work directly with dentists by following detailed written instructions and using molds, called "impressions," of the patient's teeth or oral soft tissues to create full dentures for patients who are missing all of their teeth; removable partial dentures or fixed bridges for patients who are missing only one tooth or a few teeth; crowns; veneers; and orthodontic appliances and splints to help straighten and protect teeth. The hallmarks of a qualified dental laboratory technician are skill in using small hand instruments, accuracy, artistic ability and attention to minute detail.

WHAT ARE THE CAREER OPPORTUNITIES?

With an increased demand for cosmetic dentistry, there is a great need for dental technicians. As the population ages and many people live longer, there will be a continued demand for artificial replacements, called "prostheses." The artistic services performed by dental technicians are crucial.

Most dental technicians work in commercial laboratories that employ from two to 200 people. The average laboratory employs about five to 10 technicians, who may provide a full range of prosthetic services or specialize in producing one particular type of prosthesis. Others work in private dental offices, dental schools, hospitals and companies that manufacture dental prosthetic materials.

WHAT EDUCATION AND TRAINING ARE NEEDED?

Although dental technicians can begin their careers without a college degree, continuing education is

encouraged. You can receive education and training through a two-year program at a community college, vocational school, technical college, university or dental school. Graduates of these programs receive either an associate's degree or a certificate. A few programs offer a four-year baccalaureate in dental technology. In most cases, you will need a high school diploma or its equivalent to apply to an accredited dental laboratory technology program.

WHAT IS THE EARNING POTENTIAL?

The salary of a dental laboratory technician depends primarily on the skills and responsibilities associated with the specific position and the geographic location of employment. Dental technicians can earn salaries equal to those of personnel in other health care occupations with similar training and experience. Experienced technicians can realize significant rewards in commercial laboratories, or they may choose to open their own dental laboratories for greater independence.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

Contact your dentist, a local dental laboratory, the state or local dental society component of the American Dental Association, or the state or local component of the National Association of Dental Laboratories in your area. Arrange for a brief visit to a dental laboratory to observe dental technicians at work. You also can contact an accredited dental laboratory technology program and talk with a counselor and visit the school.

For more information about careers in dental laboratory technology, visit "www.ada.org/goto/careers" or call the American Dental Association (members: toll-free number, Ext. 2390; nonmembers: 1-312-440-2390), or email Beverly Skoog, coordinator, Career Guidance, ADA Council on Dental Education and Licensure, at "skoogb@ada.org". You also may visit "www.nadl.org", the Web site of the National Association of Dental Laboratories. ■

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