



BDA advice

Careers in dentistry

Date: September 2017

Careers in dentistry

Contents

Dentists

Dental Care Professionals

- Dental nurses
- Dental hygienists and dental therapists
- Orthodontic therapists
- Dental technicians
- Clinical dental technicians
- The dental trade

Useful contacts

- Dental schools
- Dental hygiene and dental therapy courses
- Dental nursing courses
- Professional associations and other useful contacts

Providing dental care is a team responsibility, and each member of the dental team has a vital role to play in the promotion and maintenance of dental health.

The focus of dental care is prevention; educating and supporting the public to help them look after their mouths and teeth. When dental disease does occur, however, dental team members can use a variety of sophisticated techniques to treat the patient's problems. Members of the dental team can pursue their careers in a variety of areas: the high street dental practice, the salaried primary dental care service, dental hospitals, universities and the armed forces.

Dentistry is an interesting and challenging vocation and offers a range of opportunities. The profession has undergone significant change in recent years, and more responsibility has been devolved to the dental team. Dental care professionals (DCPs), such as dental nurses, dental hygienists, therapists and dental technicians play an integral part in the services provided by the modern dental practice.

To work in dentistry, dentists and DCPs must be registered with the [General Dental Council](#) (GDC), the profession's regulatory body.

View this advice online at: www.bda.org/atoz

Dentists

Dentistry provides an opportunity to pursue a career offering an intellectual and practical challenge, a service to society and a respected place in the community. Essential qualities are a liking for people and an interest in their welfare, as well as good eyesight and manual dexterity.

Oral and dental health is an important part of general health. The ability to smile, eat and talk without pain, discomfort or embarrassment contributes greatly to a sense of well-being. Dentists are healthcare professionals who are experts in the diagnosis and treatment of a range of problems that affect the mouth and teeth. This demands diagnostic, clinical and social skills. Some dentists are teachers or lecturers in dental schools; others are employed in hospitals or community clinics. The majority will work in general dental practice, often managing a team that could include other dentists, dental nurses, hygienists, therapists and receptionists - so good leadership and managerial abilities are needed.

Qualifications

There are sixteen dental schools located in major cities throughout the UK, offering a total of around 1000 places each year. The dental degree course is usually five years and leads to a Bachelor in Dental Surgery (BDS or BChD). The course includes a sound academic education combined with theoretical and practical training in all aspects of dentistry. Subjects studied include anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, pathology, behavioural sciences and dental materials science, as well as clinical skills.

The academic requirements for entry vary between dental schools and typically include top grades in the sciences. Selection may include a [clinical aptitude test](#) (UKCAT). Some dental schools offer a foundation year for suitable candidates lacking the relevant science subjects. The entry requirements of individual schools are available from [UCAS](#). Information on dental school ranking is available from [Unistats](#).

Graduates with a good honours degree in a bio-medical or healthcare related subject can apply for a four-year course offered by a limited number of dental schools (listed on the [UCAS](#) website).

Dentistry is a popular degree course and competition is extremely high. You must be able to demonstrate an interest in dentistry and all dental schools now require

applicants to have a minimum of two weeks' work experience in a dental practice. You will need to arrange your own placement. The practice will explain the need for absolute patient confidentiality and the relevant health and safety issues.

The number of places available to study dentistry are tailored to the future needs for dentists, as part of the government's workforce planning. Shortages and surfeits of dentists have been identified historically and the available places have increased and decreased accordingly. There is some evidence of a current shortage of dentists in parts of the UK.

Once qualified, dentists and all members of the dental team must keep their knowledge and skills up to date through continuing professional development (CPD). The GDC specifies the CPD requirements for all dental professionals. An extensive range of short courses is available, as well as courses leading to postgraduate qualifications, often on a part-time basis.

The GDC specifies the dental curriculum and inspects all dental schools for quality assurance. [Preparing for practice](#) describes the learning outcomes that you will need to demonstrate by the end of your training.

As a dental student, you must be aware of and adhere to the [professionalism and fitness to practice](#) requirements published by the GDC.

Studying abroad

Applicants who have not been accepted by UK dental school, sometimes consider studying in an EU country providing a dental course taught in English; Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, for example. While the UK is a member of the EU, the GDC will accept EU qualifications if the host country approves the qualification. However, the future of this arrangement is uncertain and will be subject to negotiations between the UK government and the EU.

The EU professional qualifications directive defines minimum training requirements so that EU qualifications held by EU citizens can be accepted across the EU. There is no standardisation in how the EU dental degree courses are delivered so you must compare the curriculum with the GDC's requirements, described in [Preparing for practice](#). UK dental schools provide a lot of direct clinical patient contact throughout the training course; you may receive less experience if you study abroad.

If you wish to practice in the UK with an EU qualification, you will compete with UK graduates for a job. This may not be a problem in areas where there is a shortage of dentists, but you may find it more challenging to secure a job in more popular areas.

As the UK moves towards leaving the EU, there may be other consequences of holding an EU dental qualification that are not yet known.

If you hold a dental degree from a non-EU country, you will need to pass further exams in the UK before you can register with the GDC.

Career options

General dental practice

Most dentists choose to work in general practice and provide patients with ongoing continuing care.

To provide NHS dentistry you will need to undertake dental foundation training (DFT, known as vocational training in Scotland); a one-year period of paid, supervised training in an approved training practice. The training provides valuable experience of general practice.

You can add a second training year in another field of dentistry – hospital and community settings are popular. This will give you a more comprehensive understanding of the opportunities available.

Demand for foundation training exceeds supply and you are not guaranteed a place. Training places are allocated following a one-day assessment of professionalism, management and leadership skills and a situational judgement test. Without this post-qualification training, your career options are limited.

Following DFT, dentists usually work in practice as a self-employed associate or (rarely) as an employed assistant. Having gained experience in general practice, some dentists will become practice owners – either by buying an established practice or starting a new practice. This requires major financial investment and you will need an aptitude for business; practice owners must manage the business and the staff and lead the team.

There is no formal career structure in general practice and you can further your knowledge at your own pace and undertake courses in areas that interest you.

General dental practice allows you flexibility in where you work, the hours and the type of dentistry you want to provide. Most practices offer both NHS and private treatment, although some are exclusively private. The mix of NHS and private treatment will affect your earnings: the government sets NHS charges; the practice owner sets private charges.

Both self-employment and practice ownership are potentially stressful and carry risks but both provide autonomy and are potentially rewarding.

Hospital dentistry

A career in hospital dentistry requires you to specialise in a particular area – for example, oral surgery, restorative dentistry, children's dentistry and orthodontics. The treatment provided is usually more complex than in general practice. Patients with certain medical conditions or facial injuries are sometimes referred to hospital for their dental treatment.

Hospital dentists are salaried and usually work as part of a team. There are defined career and training pathways that require recognised postgraduate qualifications.

However, the hours are not as flexible as general practice and some posts require you to be 'on call', which can result in long working hours.

Community dental service (CDS)

The CDS provides dental care for patients with special needs – for example, those with mental or physical disabilities. The work is varied and can be demanding.

CDS dentists are salaried and there is a defined career structure. You will have opportunities to undertake research or take on a managerial role. There are a limited number of places for foundation training,

Armed forces

Dentists in the armed forces provide comprehensive dental care for service men and women, both abroad and in the UK. Dentists hold a commissioned rank and there is a structured career path. Financial scholarships may be available during your dental studies. It is possible to undertake dental foundation training in the armed forces sector.

Industry

Larger companies (oil companies and car manufacturers, for example) sometimes employ dentists to provide a dental service to their employees. These posts are usually salaried but the work is similar to general practice. These positions are relatively rare.

University teaching and research

Research is usually undertaken at university dental schools and is often combined with a teaching post, so you can pursue an interest in great detail. University dental teachers have postgraduate qualifications and can progress to become senior lecturers or professors.

Registration and professional ethics

On qualifying and before being able to practise, you must register with the GDC and abide by its ethical guidelines. If your behaviour is called into question (for example, by a complaining patient), the GDC will assess the complaint and your explanations. It can remove registration and prevent you working as a dentist.

Find out more

Most dentists are willing to discuss their work and the rewards that it brings. Further information about the professional obligations of dentists is published by the [GDC](#).

Dental Care Professionals (DCPs)

DCPs include dental nurses, hygienists, therapists, orthodontic therapists, dental technicians and clinical dental technicians. All DCPs must register with the [GDC](#) and are required to comply with its standards and ethical guidance and keep their knowledge and skills up to date through continuing professional development (CPD).

Dental nurses

A dental nurse is an essential member of the dental team; supporting the clinician and helping to ensure that the patient is well cared for. A welcoming and reassuring manner is essential, as well as being calm, friendly and efficient.

Most dental nurses work in general dental practice but some work in the community dental service, the hospital service, the armed forces and companies providing dental care for their employees.

Chairside

A dental nurse provides assistance to the clinician (dentist, dental hygienist or dental therapist) throughout a patient's visit. You need to understand a variety of procedures and ensure that the correct instruments and equipment are available and prepare the various materials required. Chairside work is very precise, so you will need a high degree of manual dexterity.

Dental nurses are usually responsible for implementing infection control procedures to protect patients and others working at the practice. You will need to understand the procedures for cleaning and sterilising instruments and equipment. You may also be involved with processing radiographs, recording information about the patient's oral health, and ensuring adequate stock.

You may also be asked to help at reception – making appointments, collecting money and getting involved in the administration of the practice. The systems in place vary between practices, so there will always be something new to learn.

Personality

You need to be flexible, adaptable and reassuring. In surgery, the pace is often fast so you will need to think and work quickly, while remaining calm. When you work closely with a clinician, you will learn to anticipate what is needed and be able to cope with last-minute changes to planned treatments. Good teamwork is essential.

You will find that patients are sometimes more willing to share their concerns with you rather than the dentist – you have a vital role in sharing with the dentist any patient concerns that affect their proposed dental treatment.

Training

Dental nurses must hold a recognised qualification and be registered with the GDC or be working towards registration. Training can take place in the workplace, at a school of dental nursing, in the armed forces or by distance learning. Training can also be undertaken via an [apprenticeship](#).

Courses leading to a qualification, involve a mix of practical work and course attendance. The Diploma in Dental Nursing and the National/Scottish Vocational Qualification in Dental Nursing (Level 3) are both recognised. For other qualifications, and especially those developed locally, you should check their status with the GDC.

The course accreditation bodies are the [National Examining Board for Dental Nurses](#) for the National Certificate in Dental Nursing or the [City and Guilds](#) for the National Vocational Qualification.

Career

After gaining a qualification in dental nursing, you can further your career options by developing additional skills. Post-qualification certificates in oral health education, conscious sedation and radiography are available. Many dental nurses also go on to train as a dental hygienist or therapist.

A teaching qualification is useful if you want to become a dental nurse tutor.

Dental hygienists and dental therapists

Dental hygienists help patients to achieve and maintain good oral health by preventing and treating periodontal (gum) disease and helping patients to develop good oral hygiene practices.

As a dental hygienist, you will be able to provide dental hygiene care to a wide range of patients including periodontal examinations, radiographs, scaling to remove deposits from the teeth and topical fluoride treatments and fissure sealants. Importantly you will be able to help patients to clean their teeth effectively to help them achieve and keep a healthy mouth. You will work closely with other healthcare professionals (especially dentists).

Dental therapists can undertake all the duties of a dental hygienist and also provide simple restorations (fillings), place pre-formed crowns, and carry out more extensive treatments on primary teeth (as well as extractions under local anaesthetic).

Hygienists and therapists can gain additional skills to allow them to provide tooth whitening.

Training

Most training establishments offer a combined course in dental hygiene and therapy leading to a combined diploma. The course lasts for around three years. Some combined courses allow students who cannot to meet the criteria for the full combined diploma, to take the diploma in dental hygiene or certificate in oral health studies instead. Some training establishments continue to offer the diploma in dental hygiene course, with no training in dental therapy.

A list of the training centres and contact details can be found on the website of the [British Association of Dental Hygiene and Therapy](#).

Training in dental hygiene and dental therapy can be undertaken in several ways:

- Diploma in Dental Hygiene and Therapy – a two-year full-time course
- BSc in Oral Health Science – a three-year full-time course
- BSc (Hons) – in dental hygiene and dental therapy or oral health sciences – a four-year full-time course.

Entry requirements for these courses vary and can be seen at [UCAS](#).

If you graduate from the combined Diploma in Dental Hygiene and Dental Therapy course and wish to work as both a hygienist and a therapist, you will need two registrations with the GDC – as a hygienist and as a therapist.

Workplace

Most dental hygienists and therapists work in dental practice, either on a full-time or part-time basis providing NHS and private treatment. Some hygienists and therapists work in the CDS, the hospital service, the armed forces, industry and dental schools.

Orthodontic therapists

Orthodontic therapists are a relatively new group of DCPs. They assist dentists in carrying out orthodontic treatment and provide some aspects of treatment themselves. A DCP qualification and at least one year's practice experience is needed to undertake the [Diploma in Orthodontic Therapy](#) training. Further information is available on the [British Orthodontic Society](#) website.

Dental technicians

Dental technicians make a wide range of dental appliances including crowns, bridges, orthodontic appliances and dentures. Producing the technical work for patients is challenging but creative and, as well as having good manual dexterity, you will need an artistic flair.

Technicians tend to produce a variety of technical items but can specialise as:

- Prosthodontic technicians – dentures
- Conservation technicians – crowns and bridges
- Orthodontic technicians – orthodontic appliances
- Maxillo-facial technicians (or maxillofacial prosthetists) – facial reconstruction following trauma or disease.

Workplace

Most technicians work in commercial dental laboratories but some work within dental practices, hospitals, the CDS and the armed forces.

Commercial dental laboratories range from single-handed businesses to large multi-site laboratories. You would usually work with local dentists although some laboratories offer a postal service and increase the geographic spread of dentists they work with.

Working in the hospital service provides you with other options. You can be attached to the maxillofacial department and be involved with making larger prostheses (including eyes, noses and ears) or work in research or teach the technical aspects of dentistry to undergraduate dental students.

Education and training

The qualifications that will allow you to register with the GDC include:

- BTEC National Diploma
- BTEC Extended Diploma in Dental Technology
- Diploma in Dental Technology
- Foundation Degree in Dental Technology
- BSc (Hons) Degree in Dental Technology

Entry requirements depend on the training course and the course provider. Further information is available on the [UCAS](#) website.

Career

You could own your own laboratory or progress within a larger laboratory (to become a senior technician or take on management responsibilities). Further qualifications could equip you to become an instructor or become a clinical dental technician.

Clinical dental technicians

A clinical dental technician (CDT) is a qualified dental technician who has undertaken additional training to provide limited treatment to patients, usually when requested by a dentist. However, a CDT can provide dentures to patients without any teeth. The available qualification is the Diploma in Clinical Dental Technology.

The dental trade

The dental trade industry provides a full range of products to the dental profession and dental laboratories; it is an international marketplace. The business of dental health care is growing worldwide and developments within the dental industry must keep pace with the demand. The trade industry is concerned with the manufacture, distribution and marketing of dental products – for example, surgery equipment, instruments and supplies. Most manufacturers specialise in one or two product areas. Further information is available from the [British Dental Industry Association](#).

Sales representatives

Retailers and some manufacturers employ a sales team to visit dental practices, laboratories and hospitals regularly to build a rapport between their company and the customer. Those involved with sales are highly trained with a wide-ranging knowledge of dentistry and can speak with authority about their company's products and services.

Useful contacts

Dental schools

[Aberdeen](#)
[Belfast](#)
[Birmingham](#)
[Bristol](#)
[Cardiff](#)
[Dundee](#)
[Glasgow](#)
[Leeds](#)
[Liverpool](#)
[London: King's College London](#)
[London: Royal London and Queen Mary's College](#)
[Manchester](#)
[Newcastle](#)
[Plymouth](#)
[Preston \(graduate entry\)](#)
[Sheffield](#)

Dental hygiene and dental therapy courses

Most dental schools offer courses in dental hygiene and therapy. Training is also available at the following educational establishments:

[Eastman Dental Hospital](#)
[University of Edinburgh](#)
[Glasgow Caledonian University](#)
[Greater Manchester School for Dental Care Professionals](#)
[Teesside University](#)
[University of Essex](#)
[University of Portsmouth](#)
[University of the Highlands and Islands](#)

Dental nursing courses

Most training takes place in the workplace with local education. It is also possible to undertake training in a school of dental nursing. These include:

[Barts and the London School of Dentistry](#)
[Birmingham Dental Hospital](#)
[Bristol School for DCPs](#)
[Cardiff University](#)
[Eastman Dental Hospital](#)
[King's College Hospital](#)
[Leeds Dental Hospital](#)
[Manchester School for DCPs](#)
[Newcastle Dental Hospital](#)
[Teesside University](#)
[University of Northampton](#)
[University of Portsmouth](#)

Professional associations and other useful contacts

[Association of Dental Administrators and Managers](#)
[British Association of Dental Nurses](#)
[British Association of Dental Therapists](#)
[British Dental Association](#)
[British Dental Industry Association](#)
[British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy](#)
[City and Guilds](#)
[Dental Laboratories Association](#)
[General Dental Council](#)
[Learn Direct](#)
[National Examining Board for Dental Nurses](#)
[The Dental Technologists Association](#)