



## get on the dental careers path

### Is this the job for me?

Take this quick quiz to find out if dental assistant is a good direction for you:

- 1 Are you interested in helping people get and maintain good oral health?  
 YES  NO
- 2 Do you like working as part of a team?  
 YES  NO
- 3 Are you good at making people feel comfortable?  
 YES  NO
- 4 Do you like to teach and assist others?  
 YES  NO
- 5 Do you like to work with delicate tools and instruments?  
 YES  NO
- 6 Do you like to stay busy and do a variety of tasks?  
 YES  NO
- 7 Do you want to get into a career in as little as one year?  
 YES  NO

If you answered yes to several of these questions, you may be on the right track!

### What's it all about?

Dental assistants help dentists with a variety of tasks, ranging from patient care to office work to lab duties. For example, a dental assistant may prepare patients for their exam and treatment, then provide chair-side assistance to the dentist. Afterwards, a dental assistant may sterilize instruments and equipment, and record information in the patient's chart. Dental assistants may also help with billing, appointment scheduling and ordering supplies.

Dental assistants, who are often the first professionals patients come into contact with in a dentist's office, also play a key role in making sure patients feel as comfortable as possible.

### What do dental assistants do?

Tasks commonly performed by dental assistants include:

- Sterilize instruments and equipment, and prepare trays.
- Prepare patient for exams and procedures.
- Answer questions and make patients as comfortable as possible.
- Assist dentists as they examine and treat patients.
- Hand instruments and materials to dentists.
- Clear patients' mouths using suction or other devices.
- Take dental X-rays and process film.
- Record information in patients' charts.

- Teach patients about general oral health care. Provide instructions.
- Take alginate impressions.
- Place dental sealants.
- Apply fluoride to patients' teeth.
- Clean and polish removable dental appliances, such as bridges.
- Make temporary crowns.
- Schedule and confirm patient appointments.
- Keep records, send bills and take payments.
- Order dental supplies and materials.

### How much money can I make?

In Alaska, dental assistants earn an average hourly wage of \$17.66, and have an average annual salary of \$36,730.

### How do I become a dental assistant? How long does it take?

To become a dental assistant, you must:

- Have a high school diploma or GED.
- Complete a training program, which includes class work, lab work and a clinical externship.
- May become certified by taking a national certification exam.

Dental assisting programs typically offer either a certificate or an associate's degree. A certificate usually takes one year of full-time study after high school, while an associate's degree takes two to three years.

Learn more about dental assistant programs in Alaska by reviewing the "training providers" section later in this publication.

### **Attention high school students!**

Think you want to become a dental assistant? Well, the time to start planning is now. In general, you should take four years of English, three years of math, three years of social studies, two years of science and possibly two years of a second language. Other recommended classes and electives include:

- Health education
- Medical office
- Community health
- Safety and first aid
- Health care occupations
- Anatomy and physiology
- Psychology
- Computer fundamentals
- Keyboarding
- General computer applications

You should also discuss your plans with a teacher, counselor or parent, and check to see what work-based learning opportunities, such as field trips, job shadowing and internships, are available in your community.

### **Are there jobs available?**

There are currently about 45 job openings a year for dental assistants in Alaska, and this occupation is expected to continue to grow quickly (35.6 percent growth compared to 14.8 percent for all occupations).

### **Where are the jobs?**

Dental assistants in Alaska work wherever dentists practice. Most dental assistants work in private dental offices. In rural Alaska, many dental assistants work for the Indian Health Service or regional health corporations.

### **What else is on this pathway?**

Although dental assisting is the only "hot job" featured in this publication, there are several other high-demand jobs on the dental careers pathway, such as dental health aide, dental hygienist and dentist! See the "how to find out more information" section of this publication to learn more.





michelle estrella

## DENTAL ASSISTANT

When Michelle Estrella graduated from East Anchorage High School in 2006, she wanted to work on cars. Her parents wanted her to be a nurse. So they compromised, and Michelle entered the dental assisting certificate program at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA).

Turns out it was a great compromise. A year later, she graduated with a certificate in dental assisting, succeeded in her externship and is now working full-time at the Alaska Veterans Affairs Healthcare System and Regional Office.

"At first I thought this was a good job to have while I decided on what I really wanted to do, but I love my job so much that this could be my career of choice," Michelle said.

As a dental assistant, Michelle helps and cleans the operatory before and after each patient, takes X-rays and alginate impressions, pours study models, gives patients instructions, and schedules patients for their next appointments.

"There are many different things that I enjoy about my job — the friendly atmosphere, the varieties of dental procedures and the patients themselves," Michelle said. "The most enjoyable part of my

job is the teamwork between the dentist and the staff members, and even the patients. I also enjoy learning and sharing knowledge with the other assistants, because there is always something to new learn."

Michelle certainly does enjoy learning. She is currently pursuing her associate's degree in dental assisting at UAA, and expects to graduate in spring 2009. She said she is also considering additional education to become a dental hygienist.

"I chose the dental field because I always enjoyed trips to the dentist and I always thought teeth were interesting," Michelle said.

**"I also saw a direct path from the education to the employment, and I knew that this job would be great as a beginning or a career. It was the best choice for me all the way around."**

