

The Dental Assistant Workforce in the United States, 2015

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Issue: Dental assistants (DAs) are important members of the oral health workforce team and perform a variety of clinical and administrative tasks. However, requirements for entry into the workforce, allowable tasks, and supervision vary by state. This study examines the dental assistant workforce to better understand roles, functions, and contributions to improving population oral health.

Methods: Mixed methods included a review of current state statutes and regulations, peer-reviewed literature, and analyses of demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the American Dental Association, the Commission on Dental Accreditation, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Information from the Dental Assisting National Board and the American Dental Assistants Association was used to corroborate findings from the state level review of law and regulation.

Findings: DAs play key roles in assisting dentists and dental hygienists in the provision of oral health services. While there is considerable variation in regulatory frameworks governing dental assisting practice, over the last decade requirements for entry to dental assisting have been more specifically defined in state laws and regulations. The majority of states now provided opportunities for DAs to practice as extended function dental assistants (EFDAs) with extra training and competency testing. Current literature suggests that use of EFDAs to provide some preventive and restorative oral health tasks increases efficiencies in dental practices and oral health clinics resulting in additional capacity within oral health delivery systems.

Discussion: Policymakers and oral health stakeholders increasingly recognize the opportunity to utilize DAs in both private and public health practice to maximize service capacity and to address unmet need especially among those currently underserved by the oral health delivery system. This recognition has led to increasing attention to requiring standardized education in extended functions and to more consistent roles for DAs on oral health teams. Continued efforts to study the dental assisting workforce are important to obtain a better understanding of evolving roles and functions and to describe the contributions of DAs to improved population oral health.

Key Words: Expanded Function Dental Assistant, Expanded Function Dental Assistant, State Regulation, Scope of Practice

HWRC Website Link:

http://www.oralhealthworkforce.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/11/Dental_Assistant_Workforce_2015.pdf