

*Patient Education  
Information  
brought to you by*



**SADA**  
THE SOUTH AFRICAN  
DENTAL ASSOCIATION



**Meet the  
Dental Assistant**

© 2021  
South African Dental Association  
Private Bag 1  
Houghton, Gauteng  
South Africa  
T: +27 11 484 5288  
E: [info@sada.co.za](mailto:info@sada.co.za)  
[www.sada.co.za](http://www.sada.co.za)

## Introduction

The dental assistant takes on significant responsibility as a member of the dental health care team. Assistants greatly increase the efficiency of the dentist in the delivery of quality oral health care and are valuable members of the dental care team.

In the past, dental assistants began their careers without formal education and were trained on the job by their employer dentists.

Now, assistants are required to complete a formal accredited education programme through a University of Technology.

## What do Dental Assistants do?

In addition to assisting the dentist during a variety of procedures, other specific tasks dental assistants may perform are set out in their scope of practice which includes:

1. preparing and managing the dental clinical environment before, during and after patient care;
2. sterilising instruments, and disinfecting surfaces and equipment in the dental environment;
3. monitoring infection control, sterilisation processes, biological, medical and / or bio hazardous waste management within the dental environment;
4. preparing dental materials and instruments (including dental hand pieces) for use in clinical procedures performed by the oral health practitioner;
5. assisting with the patient's needs and comfort during dental treatment;
6. providing clinical assistance using four handed dentistry which includes instrument transfer, high speed suctioning and

debridement techniques in procedures that are performed by an oral health practitioner;

7. recording patient data gathered during patient interview, oral assessment of the hard and soft tissues and oral assessment of other oral structures and during the treatment of the patient;
8. processing dental radiographs;
9. caring for and maintaining equipment used in the dental clinical environment; and
10. assisting the oral health practitioner in the event of a medical emergency in the dental environment and applying the necessary measures during clinical emergencies.

## Where do Dental Assistants work?

Since many dentists employ two or more dental assistants, employment opportunities in this field are excellent.

The types of practice settings available to dental assistants include:

- solo dental practices (practices with only one dentist);
- group practices (practices with two or more dentists);
- specialty practices, such as oral and maxillofacial surgery (removal of teeth and correction of facial deformities),
- orthodontics (straightening teeth with braces or other appliances),
- endodontics (root canal treatment),
- periodontics (treatment of gum problems)
- prosthodontics (replacement of lost teeth)
- public health dentistry, including settings such as schools and clinics which focus on the prevention of dental problems within entire communities;
- hospital dental clinics, assisting dentists in the treatment of bedridden patients; and
- dental school clinics, assisting dental students as they learn to perform dental procedures.

## What education /training does a Dental Assistant need?

It takes a relatively short period of time to become a dental assistant i.e. , a 1-year full time course or 2 years part time.

Dental assistants receive their formal education through accredited University of Technologies.

For candidates who matriculated in 2007 or before, in addition to the general admission requirements, a minimum mark of 50% on Standard Grade or 40% on Higher Grade in Biology/ Physiology is required.

For candidates who completed the NSC in 2008 and thereafter in addition to the general admission requirements, a minimum mark of 50% in Life Sciences is required.

Graduates of these programmes usually receive a Higher Certificate: Dental Assisting.

## What is a Dental Assistant's earning potential?

The salary of a dental assistant depends primarily upon the responsibilities associated with the specific position and the geographic location of employment.

Dental assistants earn salaries equal to other health care personnel with similar training and experience such as medical assistants, physical therapy assistants, occupational and pharmacy assistants.

There is no regulated minimum earnings or salary benchmarks.