

**TITLE: Alberta Dental Assistants: Entry to practice education and role expansion**

**AUTHORS:**

**Ardene Robinson Vollman, PhD RN**

Robinson Vollman Inc.

Adjunct Associate Professor

Faculty of Medicine, Department of Community Health Sciences

University of Calgary

19 Evergreen Rise SW

Calgary AB T2Y 3H6

Phone: 403-239-3180

Fax: 403-452-0813

E-mail: avollman@shaw.ca

**Susan vander Heide, RDA**

Assistant Executive Director and Complaints Director

College of Alberta Dental Assistants

166 - 14315 118 Avenue NW

Edmonton, AB T5L 4S6

Phone: 780-486-3146, ext. 22

Fax: 780-486-2728

E-mail: svanderheide@abrda.ca

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## **Alberta Dental Assistants: Entry to practice education and role expansion**

Recently, Dental Assistants in Alberta have expressed the view that their career paths were limited because of the criteria used for their education preparation and employment contexts. To explore this perception in more depth and detail, a survey was carried out in 2010 to establish work experience and practices of Dental Assistants in Alberta, to obtain information about non-clinical competencies, and to gather opinions about Dental Assistant education and training (infoFeedback, 2010; Robinson Vollman, 2010).

E-mail questionnaires were sent to members (n=4247) of the College of Alberta Dental Assistants (CADA); a 37.3% response rate was achieved. The questionnaire included items that could be quantified as well as open-ended questions to gather more narrative data.

Three-quarters of all respondents work in the two major city centres, Calgary and Edmonton. One-quarter of the respondents is under 30 years of age, 60% are between 30 and 49 years of age, and the remainder over 50 years old, roughly matching the demographics of the profession in Alberta.

Most of those responding to the survey indicated that they worked in general practice (80%). Seventeen percent reported working in orthodontic practice, the remainder worked in other specialty areas (e.g., oral surgery, endodontic, paediatric, prosthodontic or periodontic).

Ninety percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that, in their practice, the Dental Assistants provided valuable support to the practice, added value to the dental team, provided excellent service to patients, and have received adequate training for their expanded role.

### **Expanding pre-service education for entry to the practice of Dental Assisting**

At present, the educational requirements for Dental Assistants in Alberta include: graduation from an approved dental assistant program; and successful completion of the National Dental Assisting Examining Board (NDAEB) written exam (or equivalent). The approved dental assisting schools in Alberta require an Alberta High School Diploma (or equivalent) with a combined overall average of 60% in English Language Arts 30-1 or 30-2, Biology 30, Chemistry 30, and either Pure Math 30 or Applied Math 30. All applicants are expected to be proficient in English. It is worth noting that the School of Dentistry at the University of Alberta states that completion of a certificate in Dental Assisting will not fulfill the pre-professional requirements for admission to the Diploma in Dental Hygiene program or the baccalaureate program in Dental Hygiene. Further, university entrance standards exceed those for the technical schools that provide dental assisting education, rendering it nearly impossible to “ladder” a career from one level (e.g., assisting) to another (e.g., hygiene, dentistry).

There was some difference of opinion expressed regarding the need for more training for Dental Assistants to be effective in their role – 25% asserted that Dental Assistants need more training to be effective, but 33% disagreed.

Ninety people responded to the open-ended question to suggest gaps in education, identifying the following: oral surgery, medical skills, communication skills, specialty practices, and front office skills. Respondents identified gaps related to oral surgery and other medical skills including: infection control (e.g., scrubbing, sterile procedures, sterilization protocols, prevention of cross contamination); medications (e.g., reading prescriptions, understanding medications); and advanced CPR and First Aid.

Communication skills were mentioned often by respondents. Included with communication skills were comments related to work ethic and time management.

*I would like to see better communication skills developed among staff so that they could better solve conflicting issues. It is important to be open to negative criticism to learn from mistakes made and feel ok about it.*

There were many comments made about preparation for specialty practice, particularly Ortho and, to a lesser extent, Perio. Several respondents noted a desire to be more proficient in dental x-rays and temporary restorations, new techniques, temporary crowns, implants (placements and procedures), connective tissue grafting. In general, there was a strong desire expressed for more clinical practice time, inclusion of Ortho as part of basic training, and (at a minimum) some introduction to the newer techniques used in contemporary dental practices.

Some respondents felt that an introduction and some experience with front office skills would address a gap in Dental Assistant education and improve the overall understanding of how a dental practice operates, its challenges, frustrations and obstacles, and why certain things are done the ways they are – to improve efficiency, to maintain good patient relations, to be better team members.

*More front end dealing with customers, payments and appointment making.*

*I believe that any additional training in these areas always enhance your practice as well as your profession. We are in constant contact with the public, clients and other professionals, we should be the best that we can be in these areas, as they beget confidence in our professionalism, as well as the practice we work in.*

Additional comments suggested that introduction to public health dentistry and to Dental Assistant practice in long-term care and hospital settings should be included in basic training.

Confidence and efficiency come with experience. Experiential opportunities on the job differ because of the dentists' preferences.

*I think the assistant program is too short with too much information condensed, just touching on subjects very lightly. When a practicum student or*

*new grad comes to our practice we have to do a lot of training and explaining of what is going on and why for very basic procedures.*

*I believe that most of the training that Dental Assistants receive happens on the job. Our skills become better the more we use them at work. It all depends what type of practice you choose to work at.*

Even if certain skills and competencies are in the Dental Assistant scope, the dentist may not allow Dental Assistants to perform them in the context of that practice.

*There are things that I am licensed as an RDA to perform but I don't feel confident because I have not done it in so long; for example, making temp crowns, place matrix bands and wedges and placement of rubber dam. My bosses have never given me a chance to do this in 4 years probably because they feel it is faster for them to do it themselves.*

Other reasons for not encouraging Dental Assistants to work to full scope include: they don't know the Dental Assistant is able and trained to do it; they don't have trust in the Dental Assistants' ability; or they are too impatient to allow learning time. Some dental offices actively encourage and contribute to continuing learning to keep Dental Assistants up to date with new products and techniques.

There were many comments about the general training adequacy of Dental Assistant programs in the province. There was considerable dissatisfaction expressed by the adequacy of Dental Assistant training, length

of program, content included, inadequacy of lab equipment and protocols taught, amount of patient contact and the confidence the graduates have at the end of the program.

*The scope of practice for Dental Assistants has increased more than any other dental discipline yet the time of educational program has remained at one academic year. For graduates to be competent with each competency they need to have sufficient time to master their skills in each competency. Currently students may only have the opportunity to experience one or two attempts at some of the competencies. Also to problem solve students need to know how and why something needs to be done before they will know how to correct or modify it. The fundamental knowledge needs to be in place for students to understand why treatment is required. In many cases the supporting knowledge and abilities have not been increased to cover the increased scope of the Dental Assistant ...*

An extended program that included in-depth academic courses that could be transferable to degree programs instead of the dental assisting training they received was a preference reported by 54% of those that were in favour of additional education. About a third (29%) would have preferred an extended program that included the Ortho and PDM modules, and 10% preferred the training they received with options for on-job training and formal post-graduate modules to improve their educational credentials.

In summary, it was suggested that pre-service education should be more focused on clinical experience, more frequent practical office experiences or office experiences of longer duration, communication, and interpersonal skills as well as academic, science, and theory courses. Whether or not this focus would mean some expansion of time in program, more access to post-graduate modules, or amendments to existing curricula, was the subject of substantial difference of opinion.

Continuing professional education was suggested as one means of filling the gaps in pre-service education. After registration to enter the profession, on-job training and courses extend the range of skills that Dental Assistants require to do their work. However, there was strong opinion that ongoing learning is a personal and professional responsibility, regardless of the length of basic education or the content in formal learning programs.

There were suggestions also that CADA could take a stronger role in continuing competency assessments, ensuring those in specialty practices have acquired the requisite modules, offer more educational courses at its September general meeting, and advocate to the schools for more accessible evening and weekend courses. Respondents also urged CADA to take a stronger stance on role expansion and salaries.

*If you provide more training for the dental assistants don't forget to tell the dentists that more wages automatically go along with more training!*

### **Expanding the Dental Assistant role**

When asked if the role of Dental Assistants should be enhanced, 10% said no on the basis that current role statements are adequate; nevertheless, dental assistants are not able to fully enact the role allowed under the Health Professions Act of Alberta (2005/252). However, 60% believe that the role of Dental Assistant should be expanded and additional clinical training/education is required. According to another 25%, no additional clinical training/education is required to expand the Dental Assistant role. Nevertheless, most respondents agreed that additional education would be positive for the profession in terms of accountability, and positive for the public in terms of improved access to oral health care and safety.

In conclusion, while Dental Assistants in Alberta have expressed the view that their career paths are limited because of education preparation and employment context, there is support to begin an exploration of ways to enhance the dental assisting role to match better the scope of practice as contained in the Alberta Health Professions Act (252/2005). To further expand the role and improve the prominence of dental assisting within the dental professions would require changes in the entry to practice education and clinical training. There is strong support for a longer educational program that would encompass present post-graduate modules and include courses for university transfer. Any efforts to undertake changes in educational requirements must take into consideration national commitments to portability of registration as Dental Assistants from province to province and have the considerable support of the

educational institutions and employers. According to our survey results, the time is fast approaching for this discussion to occur.

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