Dental Laboratory Technician

Overview

Dental laboratory technology is the art and science of manufacturing corrective devices and replacements for natural teeth. A dental lab technician (also called dental technician) works closely with the dentist, who plans the treatment and places the restoration or corrective device in the patient's mouth.

There are two types of dentistry which call for the skills of a dental lab tech: Restorative (or prosthetic) dentistry is performed when patients lose teeth through an accident or illness, and the teeth must be replaced to maintain normal functions. Orthodontic treatment is provided when teeth must be moved or stabilized to optimize function or to prevent painful dysfunction.

This profession is an art, because each restoration is unique and must simulate the function of the patient's natural teeth. Beyond that, the technician's great challenge is to capture and recreate both the perfection and the imperfection of the patient's own teeth, so his or her smile looks completely natural.

Dental lab technology is also a science -- and an ever-expanding one, at that, as technology continues to advance rapidly. Technicians use a variety of high-tech materials, such as ceramics, plastics and metal alloys for fixed restorations (crowns and bridges). They also must have a keen understanding the mechanics of both the mouth and the dental devices, as they determine the physical forces at work, as well as the characteristics and handling properties of various wires and materials.

Ideal candidates for this career possess excellent eye-hand coordination, good color perception, dexterity with small instruments, an interest in material sciences, and the patience to attend to minute details. Dental technology also is a good field for people who dream of owning their own business.

To meet a dental lab tech (http://science.education.nih.gov/LifeWorks.nsf/Interviews/Ana+M.+Remond), see the NIH "Lifeworks" (http://science.education.nih.gov/LifeWorks.nsf/feature/index.htm) website.

For more information on becoming a dental lab tech, see the National Association of Dental Laboratories (NADL) (http://www.nadl.org/careers.cfm) website. Also, the American Dental Association (ADA) (http://www.ada.org/) has useful information (http://www.ada.org/public/careers/team/lab.asp) about becoming a dental lab tech.

Working Conditions

Most dental technicians are employed in commercial dental laboratories; these are often very small (i.e., 2-3 employees), although there also are very large labs with as many as 100 employees or more. In addition, some private dental offices have their own laboratory. The military employs a number of dental technicians, and highly experienced technicians also may become teachers in a dental technology program.

Dental laboratory technicians generally work in clean, well-lighted, and well-ventilated areas. Technicians usually have their own workbenches, which can be equipped with Bunsen burners, grinding and polishing equipment, and hand instruments, such as wax spatulas and wax carvers. The work is extremely delicate and time-consuming. Salaried technicians usually work 40 hours/week, but self-employed technicians frequently work longer hours.

Academic Requirements

Most dental laboratory technicians learn their craft on the job. They begin with simple tasks, such as pouring plaster into an impression, and progress to more complex procedures, such as making porcelain crowns and bridges.

Becoming a fully trained technician requires an average of 3 to 4 years, depending upon the individual's aptitude and ambition, but it may take a few years more to become an accomplished technician.

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Training in dental laboratory technology also is available through community and junior colleges, vocational-technical institutes, and the Armed Forces. Formal training programs vary greatly both in length and in the level of skill they impart. For a list of accredited dental lab tech programs (http://www.ada.org/prof/ed/programs/search_dahlt_us.asp), see the American Dental Association website.

After receiving training, dental lab technicians may become certified by taking and passing the Certified Dental Technician exam (http://www.nbccert.org/cdt_exam_cont.shtml), offered by the National Association of Dental Laboratories (http://www.nadl.org/).

**Professional Associations**

American Dental Education Association (http://www.adea.org/)
American Dental Association (http://www.ada.org/)
National Association of Dental Laboratories (http://www.nadl.org/)

**Funding Opportunities**

Search for funding opportunities in this field (http://www.explorehealthcareers.org)

**Enrichment Programs**

Search for enrichment programs in this field (http://www.explorehealthcareers.org)

**Source**

www.bls.gov

**Learn more about this field:**

Dentistry (http://www.explorehealthcareers.com/en/Field.3.aspx)

Average Salary: $28,496
Years in school: 0 - 2 *
Job outlook: Excellent
* after high school graduation

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