



INFORMATION BULLETIN

March 26, 2009

Understanding the Dental Health Team

April is Dental Health Month. We tend to say “I’m off to the dentist” but who is it we actually see? Many of us are unaware of the team work and complex training behind our dental visits. Knowing who does what is important in maintaining your own and your family’s oral health.

If you are going for a regular check-up and cleaning, you are most likely to be served by four members of the dental team: a dentist, receptionist, dental hygienist and dental assistant.

The receptionist schedules your appointment, greets you when you arrive, processes your payment or insurance form, and trouble shoots.

Dental hygienists scale or root plane away tartar and plaque, take measurements of the gum and bone, apply fluoride and other treatments, and provide patient information. Most dental hygienists complete a three diploma program.

Dental assistants must complete a ten month training program and a national board exam. They are the people who settle you into the chair, record or update your medical history, take routine x-rays and works in tandem with the dentist on any dental procedure you may need. “The dentist and dental assistant work side by side all day long,” says Dr. Sylvie Renoir, an Edmonton dentist. “The assistant does much more than hand instruments to the dentist. It is more like a good relationship: you need to communicate well and share the common goal of putting the patient first.”

The dentist is responsible and accountable for everything that goes on in the dental office. Only the registered dentist is educated and trained to diagnose oral health problems, plan treatment, prescribe medication or screen for oral cancer. During a typical office visit, the dentist takes a thorough look around the teeth and gums, reviews the x-rays, recommends and implements treatment, provides patient education and/or gives a referral to a dental specialist. Dentists complete six or more years of training and must be members in good standing of the Alberta Dental Association and College, the body that sets standards and guidelines for the profession.

Dentists may take additional years of training to specialize in orthodontics (braces and other appliances), pediatric dentistry, prosthodontics (crowns, bridges, implants), dental radiology, maxillofacial oral surgery (reconstructive surgery), endodontics (e.g. root canals), periodontics (gums and soft tissues) or other specialties.

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A related member of the dental team is the dental technologist who work in a dental laboratory to make appliances, dentures, crowns and bridges.

“Dentistry is as complex and varied as medicine,” says Dr. Renoir, “and like the medical team, we need to put the patient’s well-being first. All of our roles are crucial and interdependent; it’s important that we work together as a well-functioning team.”

For more information about the oral health team, talk to your dentist or go to the Alberta Dental Association and College website www.abda.ab.ca.

Backgrounder attached

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BACKGROUNDER

Dental Specialists

Dental specialists are dentists who have eight or more years of university education in dentistry and a dental specialty. While general dentists can perform the procedures specialists do, there are complex treatment needs which are best done under the care of dental specialists.

Endodontists

Dental specialists who diagnose and treat the nerves and blood supply of the teeth when they are injured or diseased. They most often perform root canals, which is the removal of the diseased tissue inside of the tooth and filling of the canal to prolong the use (or function) of the tooth.

Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons

Dental specialists who diagnose and treat problems related to the jaw and facial structures. This includes extracting teeth, diagnosis and treating cysts and tumors, treating jaw abnormalities and treating traumatic facial injuries.

Orthodontists

Dental specialists who diagnose and treat a poor bite and improperly positioned teeth to improve the functioning of the teeth and their overall cosmetic appearance. Most often young people seek treatment from orthodontists, but adults are also being successfully treated.

Pediatric Dentists

Dental specialists who diagnose and treat dental problems in children. Some children have unique medical or physical problems requiring special management, technical skills or procedures.

Periodontists

Dental specialists who diagnose and treat diseases of the gums and supporting structures and tissues. Periodontal treatment rescues and maintains teeth that would otherwise be extracted.

Prosthodontists

Dental specialists who diagnose and repair badly broken-down teeth, as well as missing teeth and structures with crowns, bridges, dentures and implants. Dental cosmetics is part of their expertise, as is the correct functioning of a person's bite.

Oral Pathologists

Dental specialists who examine and diagnose diseases of the oral tissues. These dentists normally work in laboratory settings and examine tissues sent to them by other dentists.

Oral Radiologists

Dental specialists who provide detailed diagnoses from examining sets of x-rays.

Public Health Dentists

Dental specialists who provide dental services to large population groups through programs that are generally funded by government agencies.