

A Little Help Here

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When my youngest granddaughter was 3, she undertook a mission to build the world's largest tower of Legos. There was a long period of silence as she toiled diligently in the next room followed by a crashing sound that could only be the tower falling down on her table. Expecting a cry of dismay or tears, it was surprising to hear a wee voice calling out in a plaintive plea "I need a little help here." Terribly cute at the time, but it made me realize that all of us need help in the performance of our jobs.

The California Dental Association commissioned a study designed to evaluate the numbers of hygienists and the purported need for additional personnel and educational resources. Included in the study was a parallel assessment of dental assistants in an effort to see if there was a sufficient number to support clinical practitioners. It was surprising to learn that the hygienist-dentist ratios did not validate any specific shortages in our state. Similar evaluation of dental assistants indicated there was a more pronounced scarcity of personnel to assist in clinical care.¹

There are reported instances where dentists practice without any assistants at all, and there are several practices where the dentist has but one assistant, but more than 95 percent of dentists have multiple dental assistants.¹ The number of assistants needed to support an individual dentist varies, but an estimate of three to four per practitioner could be considered to be a workable, conservative ratio. Given the more than 30,000 dentists in the state and the relatively rapid turnover of assistants for a multitude of factors, one can appreciate that the employment pool needs to be large. Most of us practice with multiple assistants in the business



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and clinical aspects of our offices. The ability to see numerous patients with an attendant increase in productivity is enhanced with a multiple-assistant office. Those procedures that are legally delegatable to assistants with tiered levels of ability and credential will be assigned allowing the supervising dentist to care for more patients and deliver better care. It is hard to imagine efficiency of operation without good supporting staff.

Most of our assistants are young people, mostly women, who are high school graduates seeking a career as opposed to pursuing a full college education. The training for these new assistants is varied. The work experience pathway, where on-the-job education is possible, is the educational track elected by many dental assistants. Other means of obtaining the skills and knowledge necessary for the career may be from community colleges, vocational educational programs in school districts, and commercial schools. Each of these institutional programs requires classes, practical and office experience, and clinical and conceptual examinations.

For the young individual who is not a "student" type, there are alternative careers. Dentistry has to compete with corporate entities such as Starbucks, Ralphs, or Costco for entry-level individuals. Unfortunately for dentistry, there is a plethora of employment opportunities that are replete with good salaries, flexible

hours, and significant benefits. Perusal of the Web sites of those and similar companies reveal that employees are eligible for packages that variably include health care (medical, dental, drugs, and vision) insurance, disability and life insurance, pension plans, educational opportunities for career development, bonus plans, legal plans, stock purchase options, dependent care, and long-term care programs. For individuals who stay with these employers, promotion into management positions is possible with career potential and salaries that can approach six figures. It is an easy option for a young person to be enticed by this in choosing a career.

The problem for dentistry is to convince these individuals that being a dental assistant and part of a health care team has many rewards that are not necessarily quantifiable. The good feeling of treating disease, providing care to patients, seeing immediate outcomes for the efforts expended, and helping people are many of the reasons we became dentists. These good feelings can be afforded to, and are enjoyed by, our assistants as well. The problem is that we cannot demonstrate those intangibles until such time as the individual has gone through the training and is working in practice and can appreciate them.

The option of stocking shelves or serving as a checker at Ralphs, assisting customers at Costco who are purchasing large quantities of items they usually do

not need at great discount, or serving up yet another Double-Double animal style at In-N-Out Burger pales in comparison to the self-actualization values of dental assisting. It is difficult to compete with industry in the recruitment and retention of assistants, and this is a priority we need to consider and act on to continue to provide safe and efficient care to our patients. ■■■■

REFERENCES

1. Pourat N, Roby D, et al, Is There a Shortage of Dental Hygienists and Assistants in California? Findings from the 2003 California Dental Survey. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, November 2005.

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