

Pathways in Dental Public Health

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ABSTRACT

Dental public health is one of the nine specialties of dentistry recognized by the American Dental Association Commission on Dental Accreditation.

Dental public health has been defined as the “science and art of preventing and controlling dental diseases and promoting dental health through organized community efforts. It is that form of dental practice which serves the community as a patient rather than as an individual. It is concerned with the dental health education of the public, with applied dental research, and with the administration of group dental care programs as well as the prevention and control of dental diseases on a community basis.”¹

This article will describe the many career and educational pathways dentists may follow to become involved in the practice of dental public health.



There are approximately 150 active diplomates of the American Board of Dental Public Health. Most are employed by the federal government, schools of dentistry, and state and local governments.² The following pathway leads to achieving diplomate status.

First, one must have a dental degree and then obtain a master's degree in public health or an equivalent degree from a school accredited by the Council on Education for Public Health of the American Public Health Association.³ A number of schools now offer distance learning programs as an alternative to the traditional 12-month curriculum. After achieving a master's degree in public health, the second year of required education is a residency in dental public health from one of the 14 ADA-accredited programs.⁴ The University of California San Francisco offers the only accredited program on the West Coast. The residency is a practicum and is competency based. The UCSF program has a distance learning option, and support for the resident is based on the availability of funding.⁵

UCSF also offers a Dental Public Health Seminar Series which covers current topics. The series can be accessed by residents pursuing the distance learning program via a toll-free telephone bridge line with seminar presentations placed



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on the web, or in person at the UCSF Laurel Heights campus. More information on the seminar series is available online at <http://www.ucsf.edu/dphtalk/>.

The following is a list of the general competencies that a resident must achieve before completing the program.⁶

- Plan oral health programs for populations.
- Select interventions and strategies for the prevention and control of oral diseases and promotion of oral health.
- Develop resources, implement, and manage oral health programs for populations.
- Incorporate ethical standards in oral health programs and activities.
- Evaluate and monitor dental care delivery systems.
- Design and understand the use of surveillance systems to monitor oral health.
- Communicate and collaborate with groups and individuals on oral health issues.
- Advocate, implement, and evaluate public health policy, legislation, and regulations to protect and promote the public's oral health.
- Critique and synthesize scientific literature.
- Design and conduct population-based studies to answer oral and public health questions.

After the completion of the residency and two years of experience, the dental public health professional is able to apply to the American Board of Dental Public Health for specialty board certification.⁷

The Dental Public Health Workforce

The dental public health workforce is made up of a variety of professionals. This is evident in the membership of the American Association of Public Health

Dentistry.⁷ The organization changed its name from "Public Health Dentists" to "Public Health Dentistry" many years ago to recognize this fact. Members are dentists without graduate training, dentists with master's in business administration, public policy, law, pediatric dentistry, doctorate degrees in epidemiology, etc. Additionally, a large number of dental hygienists, with and without public health degrees, are involved in dental public health activities. In fact, many hygienists serve in state and federal agencies. There also are many dental health educators involved in the field, and their education is varied.

How Can I Become Involved in Dental Public Health?

California is fortunate to have many master of public health programs throughout the state. These can be traditional, executive, or distance learning programs. This professional educational program transforms one's thinking from focusing on the individual patient to focusing on the community. After completing a master's in public health, one can continue one's education, or look for dental public health opportunities. Entry-level positions usually are a mixture of administration and clinical care associated with the position of dental director of one of the many community health centers dental clinics in California. Job postings and other information on oral health programs are listed on the California Primary Care Association's website.⁸

Careers with local and state government in California are rare as very few of the counties or cities in the state utilize dentists as program administrators. Networking is a primary vehicle for job location and career transformation. One first needs to identify the

dental public health programs in each county, city, or state then volunteer to be on one of the advisory committees associated with these programs. This is where an opportunity will appear. These local committees often write or receive grant funding from outside sources and are in need of professional help to implement these programs.

If one is willing to relocate, there are many dental public health opportunities nationwide. There are positions in state health departments; the federal government, including the Indian Health Service; Bureau of Prisons; community health centers; and schools of dentistry. Flexibility is key to locating a dental public health position.^{7,9-10}

There are also dental public health opportunities in pharmaceutical industry, such as Procter & Gamble; Colgate; and Pfizer. The dental insurance industry also employs dental public health professionals as dental directors and quality assurance auditors. A list of California companies can be found at the California Association of Dental Plans' website.¹¹

While a basic interest in dental public health will suffice in many entry-level work positions, board certification in the specialty is required in higher-level positions of responsibility where the planning of high-quality health care programs for large groups, conducting critical research in public health, or teaching postgraduate level courses in public health is the ultimate aim.

California Endowment Scholars in Health Policy at Harvard University

The California Endowment Scholars in Health Policy at Harvard University is a one-year, full-time, academic degree-granting program designed to create health professional leaders, particularly minority physician leaders, who will

pursue careers in health policy, public health practice, or academia. The program is designed to incorporate the critical skills taught in schools of medicine, public health, government, business, and dental medicine with supervised practical leadership forums conducted by senior faculty and nationally recognized leaders in minority health and public policy, a seminar series, and scholarship travel. The program is designed to prepare health professional leaders who will, over time, improve the capacity of the health care system to address the health needs of minority and disadvantaged populations. So far, three dentists from California have graduated from this program. More information can be found online.¹²

Herschel S. Horowitz Scholarship

The American Association of Public Health Dentistry Foundation's Herschel S. Horowitz Scholarship supports dentists pursuing dental public health graduate education. The scholarship is made possible through donations to the foundation and contributions from the family of Dr. Horowitz. Dentists enrolled in a full-time accredited master's of public health program or the first year of a two-year advanced education in the dental public health program are eligible to apply for up to \$25,000 in support. The application is available online.⁷

American Dental Association's Hillenbrand Fellowship Reinstated in 2005

The Hillenbrand Fellowship, offered every other year, will support one dentist fellow who has demonstrated strong leadership potential and who desires to make a career transition from dental practice, education or research to management and leadership in a health-related organization.

The program will be enhanced by

the ADA's partnership with the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, which offers experiential learning and university-based teaching.

The dentist chosen for the fellowship will complete a 12-month internship at ADA headquarters in Chicago, focusing on nonclinical organizational experience

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and education. The program will provide an intensive orientation to all ADA agencies and departments, orientation to other oral health organizations, academic courses and hands-on project management experience. Although the focus will be on learning about leadership in private sector organizations, there will also be basic orientation to federal and state government agencies playing key roles in oral health. More information can be found on the ADA's website.

Board-Certified Public Health Dentists

Even though the number of diplomates of the American Board of Dental Public Health is small, approximately 150, they presently have, and previously had, a significant influence on oral health policy in the United States. Diplomates have held leadership positions at the federal level such as the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (Dr. Dushanka Kleinman, chief dental officer of the U.S. Public Health Service); the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Oral Health (Dr. William Maas); assistant surgeon general; and staffing of the surgeon general's office in conjunction with the publication *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General* (Dr. Caswell Evans). Diplomates have been the president of the American Public Health Association (Drs. Allukian and Evans)

and the American Association of Public Health Dentistry (Dr. Jane Weintraub). They have served as executive directors of the International Association of Dental Research (Dr. Robert Collins, deputy executive director) and the American Dental Education Association. Also, diplomates have been deans at a number of dental schools in the United States (Dr. Teresa Dolan, University of Florida School of Dentistry and president of the American Board of Dental Public Health; Dr. John C. Greene, past assistant surgeon general and dean emeritus, UCSF School of Dentistry). **CDA**

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