

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Dental technicians – a national career survey

A national survey of dental technicians: career development, professional status and job satisfaction

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Objective

To investigate the career development, perception of status within the dental team, and level of job satisfaction of dental technicians in the United Kingdom.

Design

Cross-sectional postal questionnaire survey of 1,650 dental technicians registered with the Dental Technicians Association. Replies were received from 996 (60%).

Results

Eighty two per cent of respondents had a qualification in dental technology and 21% also had an advanced level qualification. Almost two thirds of the respondents had undertaken no verifiable continuing professional development in the previous year. Only 27% of respondents expected to develop their career over the next five years. Less than 50% of the respondents felt adequately valued as individuals and as a professional group in the dental team. Job satisfaction was significantly related to age, attendance at one or more courses in the last year, working shorter hours, feeling valued in the dental team, and future career plans.

Conclusions

Plans for the registration and role expansion of dental technicians provide opportunities for career development which have yet to be realised. The low levels of continuing professional development currently undertaken indicate the need for a review of the provision and funding of training at a strategic level. Whilst levels of job satisfaction are satisfactory, many dental technicians feel insufficiently valued in the dental team.

IN BRIEF

- Current policy changes provide opportunities for the role development of dental technicians within the dental team.
- Factors relating to job satisfaction of dental technicians are explored.
- Many dental technicians feel insufficiently valued in the dental team.
- Only a minority of dental technicians expect to develop their careers over the next five years.
- Factors influencing the low levels of continuing professional development undertaken are discussed.

COMMENT

This is an overdue contribution to the literature relevant to workforce planning for the dental team. It is particularly important because of the shortage of published information on the dental technician workforce. We are now moving rapidly towards statutory registration for all professionals complementary to dentistry (PCDs) and developing expanded dental team working. We need to know more about factors which will encourage the recruitment and retention of dental technicians. This paper explores factors such as perceptions of job satisfaction, being valued team members and career development expectations. The findings are both encouraging and alarming in this respect.

Representative sampling of dental technicians is difficult because they do not need to be qualified, registered or work in registered premises. The authors have taken a pragmatic approach, conducting a postal questionnaire survey on members of the Dental Technicians Association (DTA). This group may not be typical, as they are qualified (or have seven years' experience) and have voluntarily registered with a professional group. They comprise less than 20% of the 10,000 or so dental technicians working in the UK and are perhaps a group most committed to and/or satisfied with their career.

The encouraging findings are that 70% expect to remain in the profession in five years' time, half have high job satisfaction, and just under half felt they (as individuals) were valued members of the dental team most or all of the time.

Findings giving concern are the long working hours, that 30% were expecting to be in another career (10%) or retired (20%) in 5 years' time, the low uptake of continuing professional development (CPD) and low expectations of career development, the lower levels of job satisfaction in younger technicians, and the high proportion who felt that as a group technicians are not valued.

The authors recognise that the findings may not be representative even of DTA members. Only 60% ($n = 996$) responded, and of these 114 were excluded because they no longer worked as technicians. The situation amongst the majority of dental technicians may be even more concerning. This paper highlights that dental technicians must not be neglected in plans for future dental training and systems of remuneration. The challenge is to reassure the profession and those considering entering it that they are valued members of the dental team, and much needs to be done to develop initial (team-based) training and CPD opportunities.

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doi:10.1038/sj.bdj.4811528