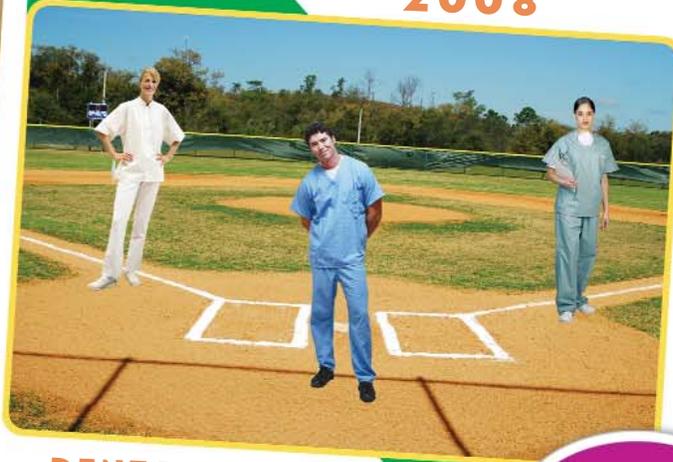


# Team Players

2008



DENTAL STAFF

Sound Bites

Everybody has heard the old saying “There’s no ‘i’ in ‘team’.” This statement can be applied as readily to the people who help take care of your mouth—the dental team—as it can to a Little League team. You know what your dentist does. The dentist is the doctor who diagnoses and treats your teeth and oral cavity. In addition to relieving you of any dental pain you may be experiencing and providing you with the information you need to maintain a healthy mouth, the dentist also keeps an eye out for any other medical conditions that could be affecting you, such as oral cancer.

The dentist is the team leader who oversees your oral health care. But what about those other people you see hustling and bustling around you while you’re sitting in the dental chair? What position do they play on the dental team?

## Dental Hygienist

The dental hygienist works under the supervision of the dentist to treat patients in the prevention of oral diseases and the preservation of natural teeth. The dental hygienist performs patient screening procedures, such as assessment of oral health conditions, review of health history, oral cancer screening, head and neck inspection, dental charting, and blood pressure and pulse monitoring. Other principal tasks generally performed by the dental hygienist include oral prophylaxis (teeth cleaning, deep scaling, polishing, and removal of stains, dental plaque, and tartar), and application of preventive treatments, such as fluoride and sealants, to the teeth. Additionally, the dental hygienist exposes dental radiographs (X-rays), and teaches patients appropriate oral hygiene strategies to maintain oral health, such as toothbrushing, flossing, and nutritional counseling. He or she may also make impressions of patients’ teeth for study casts (models of teeth used by dentists to evaluate patient treatment needs). Dental hygienists must pass a written national exam and both a clinical and a written exam to be licensed in the state of Massachusetts.

## Dental Assistant

The dental assistant works in the operatory or treatment room, under the supervision of the dentist, and aids the dentist with a variety of treatment procedures. He or she prepares dental impression and restorative materials, evacuates debris from the oral cavity during procedures, and prepares the operatory for dental procedures, including dental instrument trays and anesthesia. The dental assistant serves as an infection control officer, developing infection control protocol, and preparing and sterilizing instruments and equipment. She or he also takes and develops dental X-rays and prepares cases to be sent to dental laboratory technicians. On the interpersonal side, the dental assistant helps patients feel comfortable before, during, and after dental treatment, and provides patients with instructions for oral care following procedures, such as the placement of a restoration.

## Dental Laboratory Technician

You may never have met the dental laboratory technician, but if you’ve ever lost a tooth and required a crown, bridge, or dentures, this member of the dental team has been valuable to you. The dental lab technician works directly with dentists by following detailed written instructions and using impressions (molds) of patients’ teeth or oral soft tissues to create dental prostheses. These include full dentures, removable partial dentures or fixed bridges, crowns, veneers, and orthodontic appliances and splints. Dental lab technicians work with a variety of materials, including wax, plastic, precious and nonprecious alloys, stainless steel, and porcelain and composites or polymer glass combinations. Many technicians acquire skill in the use of sophisticated instruments and equipment while performing laboratory procedures. It is the dental lab technician’s charge to help create tooth replacements that are both attractive and functional. Many larger dental practices may have a dental laboratory technician on-site, but most technicians work in an independent laboratory and provide services for multiple dental offices.

## Office Personnel

Depending on the size of the practice, the dental office may also be staffed with additional personnel who provide administrative and business support to the dentist, helping the dental practice run smoothly and efficiently. This can include the office manager, who is in charge of all business aspects associated with running the practice, from managing front office personnel to being responsible for supply inventory and vendor relations. Additional staff can include front desk personnel, such as a receptionist, who schedules appointments and interacts with patients, and a billing clerk, who processes payments and insurance claims. Some practices may have a staff accountant to oversee the finances. As with any business, if the dental practice is a smaller operation, it is not uncommon for members of the team to wear more than one hat. So, the dental hygienist may also schedule appointments or maintain supply inventory, or the dental assistant may help out with the billing.

As you can see, keeping a mouth healthy is indeed a team effort. These dental team members all work hard to ensure that you have the best oral health care and a pleasant experience at the dental office. But don’t forget, the most important team member is you, so you’ll want to make sure that you maintain good oral hygiene habits, like brushing and flossing, and that you visit your dentist every six months for checkups and cleanings. ◉

For more information on the dental team, or if you’d like to learn about pursuing a career in one of these fields, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit the MDS Web site at [www.massdental.org](http://www.massdental.org).