

Are You Considering Specialty Training?



A guide for dental students from the American Academy of Periodontology

Graduating from a dental program comes with a myriad of decisions to make about the future. Many new dentists consider dental specialty training as a means to boost their skill sets and marketability as they launch their careers.

Here are some questions to consider if you are thinking about entering a dental specialty:

Is it right for you?

Becoming a specialist allows a dentist to focus his or her career on a chosen field of dentistry. So the first consideration should be whether or not you want to hone in on one particular area. Is there a specialty that really excites you, or that you can imagine yourself practicing for most of your working hours? Do you feel you have an aptitude for a certain specialty? Perhaps as a specialist you would hope to have the resources to provide the highest standard of advanced care? If you are content with the level and variety of care you can provide as a general practitioner and enjoy that mix, then specializing might not be the right choice for you.

What are the financial implications?

According to the American Dental Association, specialists can earn a significantly higher annual income compared to general dentist colleagues¹; however, this is not a guarantee of financial success, and specialty training is an expensive career investment. While a few programs may actually offer stipends, most carry an annual tuition² for three to four years. Consider also that this does not take into account lost income if you would be working in a practice. Programs require a full-time commitment from you, so there is likely little opportunity for outside supplementary income. Entering a full-time program may require you to dip into a significant amount of savings or acquire additional educational loans.

What personal sacrifices might you have to make?

If you are continuing straight out of dental school, the intensity of your studies are likely to increase. If you are entering a program after practicing for a time, adding a training program to the mix may



have an impact on your work-life balance, with much of your free time dedicated to your additional schooling. An added dimension is that you will be expected to become more intimately familiar with the major players in your field and the literature that supports your specialty. A research project is also a likely requirement of a program. The learning continues long after you've completed the program, as continuing education is an important facet of any dental career. Your expertise requires you to be up-to-date with current research and trends.

When is the best time for you to specialize?

Acclimating to the rigor of a specialty program may be less difficult for those continuing right after dental school compared to those who have been practicing and away from study for a number of years. There is also the responsibility of family personal commitments to consider.

If you are unsure about which specialty to choose, keep your options open and take time to explore what might be a good fit. However, if you are interested in a particular field and are confident in pursuing it further, go for it.

An established dentist is likely to have a broader and stronger base of general dentistry before entering a specialty program and this can help in

determining fit, understanding concepts, and picking up skills.

What can you do to maximize the chances of your application being successful?

To meet entry requirements for a specialty training program, you must demonstrate proficiency in all phases of dentistry and have exemplary letters of reference. Many pre-doctoral dental programs today are pass/fail and do not provide a class ranking, so if you are selected for an interview, the final selections are often dependent on your face-to-face meeting. If you are applying after being in practice, your post-graduate activities will also weigh positively in your selection chances.

Here are a few other things to that might earn you the green light:

- A dental degree or being on track to graduate with a degree
 - Varied clinical experience in your external rotations or elective courses. Hospital residencies are valuable, especially if they are relevant for your specialty of interest.
 - Undergraduate as well as postgraduate awards and presentations will enhance any application. Publications demonstrate initiative, enthusiasm, intellect, and good organizational skills. It is important to get research experience, as this can be an integral part of a residency. It is helpful to accomplish some of this during dental school, if possible, or while participating in a hospital residency. Record your cases in a portfolio to highlight your experience and scope of care.
 - Continual professional development demonstrates a passion for education. Choose your courses and lectures wisely, and ensure these are plentiful for your chosen specialty as these provide evidence of your interest in the subject.
 - Membership in relevant organizations is highly recommended; you may even consider attending their seasonal meetings or conferences.
 - Research your program, review online prospectuses, visit schools, and talk to the current residents. This will offer you invaluable insight into the differences between various programs. The current residents will also be able to share useful tips for the application and provide a realistic idea of day-to-day life in the program.
- Keep track of deadlines and don't procrastinate. You need to leave plenty of time to work on your application, as many drafts may be required.
 - Be prepared for the interview. Arrange a mock interview with a colleague who has experience of the specialist interview process. Also, ask the recent specialty candidates of their interview experience. Interviews are usually not very technical but some light background reading on the specialty is recommended. Arrive for the interview on time in smart attire, ask relevant questions, and be polite and professional.
 - Keep trying if you are not admitted to a specialty training program. Find out what you may need to work on and make a plan of action for your next application. Experience of the application process prepares you for your next opportunity.

Considering Periodontics? Consider This.

- Periodontics is a therapeutic and surgical specialty. More than any facet of dentistry, periodontal health has a direct and bidirectional relationship with systemic health.
- Advances in understanding of inflammatory processes and in wound healing and their clinical applications are hallmarks of periodontal research. Applications include prevention and management of periodontitis, regeneration of damaged periodontal tissues, and taking advantage of bone healing dynamics to prepare sites and placement of dental implants in rehabilitating missing dentition.
- Considering the prevalence of periodontal diseases and the relationship with systemic conditions, periodontics, more than any other specialty field, could be considered a primary care specialty, much like internal medicine specialists often act as primary care physicians.
- Periodontics requires a close working relationship with the referring and restorative dentist. It is important to nurture good communication skills with patients as well as colleagues to be able to plan and guide a comprehensive oral health care plan for your patients.

– From the AAP Education Committee

1. <http://www.ada.org/en/science-research/health-policy-institute/data-center/dental-practice>

2. American Dental Association, Health Policy Institute, 2014-15 Survey of Advanced Dental Education.

Adapted from "SPECIALTY TRAINING - 5 QUESTIONS" by Reena Wadia BDS Hons (Lond) MJDF RCS (Eng) www.reenawadia.com