Career: Dentistry

Dentistry (DDS)

What does a dentist do?
Dentists help patients maintain oral health which has recently been shown to be an important aspect of overall health care and disease prevention. Dentists are trained to treat people from all age groups. They examine the head, neck and oral cavity and diagnose conditions using advanced technologies including radiography and computer generated imaging. They also restore and replace teeth damaged from decay, trauma or disease. By repositioning teeth, they can often improve chewing, speech, digestion of food, and appearance. A number of specialties are available within dentistry with further training following dental school including endodontics (treatment of injuries to dental nerves), oral and maxillofacial surgery, orthodontics, prosthodontics (creating fixed or removable appliances), dental public health, and several other specialties.

How do I become a dentist?
To attend one of the 56 accredited dental programs in the United States, you will need a bachelor’s degree with any major of your choice as long as you have the appropriate prerequisite courses (see below). Dental school is a 4 year professional school program that follows your undergraduate degree. The degree earned will be either a DDS (Doctor of Dental Surgery) or a DMD (Doctor of Medical Dentistry). The degrees are equivalent. After graduating from dental school, a licensing examination is required.

What is the job outlook?
According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the job outlook for dentists is excellent. Money magazine placed dentistry on its list of the 15 highest paying medical professions with an average salary of $204,500. Many dentists have their own practice or work as part of a small practice so they often enjoy greater flexibility in their work schedules. Full time dentists spend approximately 36 hours per week in their practices.

What prerequisite courses do I need?
Although dental programs may differ slightly in their requirements, they generally require the minimal requirements of 1 year of biology with labs, 1 year of general chemistry with labs, 1 year of organic chemistry with labs, 1 year of physics with labs and 1 year of English including a composition course. Specific courses for Indiana University are listed below. Many schools also recommend courses such as art, business management, accounting, statistics, interpersonal communications, Spanish, cell biology,
genetics, histology, microbiology, and molecular biology. The IU requirements are listed below, but the requirements for other programs can be found in the ADEA Official Guide to Dental Schools.

IU requires the following:
Anatomy & Physiology: BIOL 203 & 204 or BIOL 301 & 302 (most dental schools do not require this)
Biology: BIOL 131/132 & BIOL 231/232 or BIOL 110/111
Inorganic chemistry: CHM 115/116
Organic chemistry: CHM 255 & 255L or CHM 257 & 257L (majority of schools require 2 semesters organic)
Biochemistry: CHM 561 or CHM 333 or BCHM 307
Physics: PHYS 220 & 221
Psychology: PSY 120
English Composition: ENGL 106 or 108

What else do I need to do before I apply?
You need to take the Dental Aptitude Test (DAT) in order to apply to dental school. The DAT is a standardized and computerized exam taken about 15 months before you intend to begin dental school (generally in the spring/summer following the junior year of college). You need to shadow a dentist to make sure this is the right field for you and that you truly understand what it means to be a dentist. Dental schools will also want to see that you could handle a heavy course load while being active in extracurricular activities, providing community service, and gaining dental experience. Research is also viewed favorably.

How do I apply?
The initial application to most dental programs is through an online application service called the American Association of Dental Schools Application Service (AADSAS). We recommend that you collect your recommendation letters using the Health Professions Advising Office professional file service. We can then submit your letters electronically to AADSAS. After filling out the application you will also send your college transcripts (along with a transcript request form) to AADSAS for verification. Your online application will include a narrative explaining why you are interested in becoming a dentist. The individual dental programs will then ask for supplementary information and will hopefully invite you to campus for an interview. Early application is recommended.

Where can I get more information?
American Dental Education Association (includes AADSAS) http://www.adea.org
American Dental Association (includes DAT) http://www.ada.org
American Student Dental Association (ASDA) www.asdanet.org
Student National Dental Association (SNDA) www.sndaonline.org
Programs in Indiana
Indiana University www.iusd.iupui.edu

For more information about Dental School programs or your interests in the health professions, contact the Health Professions Advisor, Amy Terstriep, Ph.D., at 765-494-4747 or prehealth@purdue.edu

ALT/njd 6/07