



Dental Hygiene Education Programs FAQ

Who decides what kind of school you need to graduate from to qualify for a dental hygiene license?

State practice laws decide in a general way what kind of school is required to qualify for dental hygiene licensure. These laws are found in the state practice acts and the related rules from state dental boards. Laws in each state include a description of the educational requirements for licensure stating that an applicant must have graduated from a dental hygiene school or program that is accredited by the ADA Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA).

CODA is a private accrediting body conducted under the auspices of the ADA and an example of how a private organization participates in regulation of a profession. Historically, the standards for dental, dental hygiene, and dental assisting programs were voluntarily created within the professions. Accreditation began with dental schools in the early 20th century. Dental hygiene programs began accreditation in the 1950s. Lawmakers turned to these standards and this system already in place rather than create a governmental agency to perform the accreditation/standard setting function.

These laws are not without some major ramifications. One issue is that dental hygienists educated and licensed abroad (except Canada) are rarely able to qualify for licensure without additional U.S. education. Another concern is that dentists and dental students cannot obtain a dental hygiene license, even though as dentists they can provide dental hygiene services as part of their practice of dentistry. (A handful of states do have specific laws that allow dental students to get temporary dental hygiene licenses and certain foreign dentists to obtain a Florida dental hygiene license).

What do dental hygiene schools teach?

The dental hygiene curriculum has developed over time--created, debated, and honed by dental hygiene educators, who are typically dental hygienists themselves and aware of what skills and knowledge are required for practice. However, CODA accreditation standards clearly have a strong influence. The standards (<http://www.ada.org/~media/CODA/Files/dh.pdf?la=en>) include discussions on faculty, facilities, and the like; however, there is a prominent section that discusses the educational program, including the curriculum and a discussion of the patient care competencies students are expected to achieve.

Of course dental hygiene programs can go beyond the CODA standards and incorporate education about emerging technologies. But since students in dental hygiene (and dental schools) are actually practicing dental hygiene and dentistry in the school clinics when they treat human patients, the school is governed by limits set by state practice laws on what and how procedures may take place. The principle of “academic freedom” applies to the freedom to teach ideas and theories—not necessarily the freedom to learn clinical skills utilizing actual patients.

Who decides where dental hygiene schools open, and how many programs can be in existence?

In the 1950's, there were 30 dental hygiene programs. Over the years, a great concern was that there were not enough programs to meet the needs of the growing public. Today, with more than 300 programs, concerns are voiced that now too many programs are in existence. Nonetheless, no agency has been developed for central planning or standards concerning how many schools are optimal—although state governments have influence on the number of programs created in the state universities and community colleges through state departments of post-secondary education and community college oversight boards. In some states, state “workforce needs” for the professions are part of the decision on whether to add a new dental hygiene program.

However, many newer dental hygiene programs are housed in proprietary or for-profit career colleges. Typically, states require these career programs to obtain a license to operate. This state approval is NOT a form of accreditation. Nor is the “need” for the program, or even the likelihood that program graduates will find positions after graduation, usually a criteria for state approval.

On the other hand, CODA and the Federal Department of Education have each taken actions that could affect the opening of new programs. On February 3, 2012, CODA decided to require a formal needs assessment from new programs seeking accreditation. The assessment must address the local and regional patient population and present employment opportunities for graduates. http://pubs.royle.com/display_article.php?id=982182.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Education hopes to discourage schools from operating career programs which do not produce graduates who are able to find positions that enable to repay federally guaranteed student loans by enacting “gainful employment” rules. Such schools must inform students about graduation and job placement rates and make available information on former students’ loan repayment rates and debt to post-graduation income comparisons, or the school could lose access to federal loan funds for their students.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/10/14/profit-colleges-say-us-discriminates-against-them-state-authorization>).

To find links to state post-secondary education agencies in your state, see <http://www.statelocalgov.net/50states-education.cfm>. For more information on today’s dental hygiene programs, go to <http://www.adha.org/dental-hygiene-programs>.