

You Asked About...

The Role of Dental Assistants in Dental Practice in Alberta

Each regulated health profession in Alberta has a profession specific regulation including *Health Professions Act: Dentists Profession Regulation* and *Dental Assistants Profession Regulation*. Each profession's regulation identifies the restricted activities a member of that regulated health profession is authorized to perform.

The Alberta *Government Organization Act* Schedule 7.1 provides a list of restricted activities that a member of an Alberta regulated health profession cannot perform unless the restricted activity is identified in the authorized restricted activities section of the regulation for the specific health profession.

For example, with dental assistants, the Authorized Restricted Activities identified in Section 12 of the *Dental Assistants Profession Regulation* include:

- 12(1) Regulated members may, within the practice of dental assisting, perform the following restricted activities under the direction of a dentist, dental hygienist or denturist who is authorized to perform or to order the performance of the following restricted activities:
- to apply any form of ionizing radiation in medical radiography;
 - to cut a body tissue or to perform surgical or other invasive procedures on body tissue in or below the surface of teeth, for the purpose of performing dental probing, including periodontal screening and recording;
 - to fit a fixed or removable partial or complete denture for the purpose of determining the preliminary fit of the device;
 - to fit a periodontal appliance for the purpose of determining the preliminary fit of the device;
 - to fit an orthodontic appliance for the purpose of determining the preliminary fit of the device.
- (2) Subject to subsection (3), a regulated member who has advanced training approved by the Council may perform the restricted activity of cutting a body tissue or performing surgical or other invasive procedures on body tissue in or below the surface of teeth, for the purpose of scaling teeth under the direction of a dentist or a dental hygienist authorized to perform that restricted activity.

- (3) The performance of the restricted activity referred to in subsection (2) is subject to the condition that the client has been recently assessed by the dentist or dental hygienist who has determined the patient has healthy gingival and periodontal tissues or plaque associated gingivitis, pockets of 4 mm or less and no overt or radiographic signs of alveolar bone loss.
- (4) For the purpose of this section, “direction” means a dentist, dental hygienist or denturist is on-site and able to assist.

Activities that are not restricted by the Alberta *Government Organization Act* Schedule 7.1 do not require an individual to be a member of an Alberta regulated health profession to perform.

The profession specific regulation authorizing a member to perform a restricted activity does not automatically mean each regulated member should perform the restricted activity. The profession specific regulation includes a section that states:

“... regulated members must restrict themselves in performing restricted activities to those activities that they are competent to perform and to those that are appropriate to the member’s area of practice and the procedure being performed.”

A College of a regulated health profession may also require special evaluation or restrict the activity of their members according to their standards. A College may create standards in relation to non-restricted activities as part of the broader obligations of a member in their dental practice, such as with the Infection Prevention and Control Standards and Risk Management for Dentistry.

Alberta dentists are able to assign duties to non-regulated individuals to perform non-restricted activities but the dentist has an obligation to assign duties in compliance with any applicable laws, ethical principles and standards of practice. The dentist must be satisfied with the competencies and abilities of the person to whom duties are assigned, and must provide appropriate supervision. The dentist is ultimately responsible for the outcomes of the person to whom the non-restricted activities are assigned.

The Alberta Dental Association and College Code of Ethics Article A12: Assignment of Duties states:

A dentist may assign duties to those under his or her supervision in compliance with any applicable laws, ethical principles and standards of practice. In doing so, the dentist must be satisfied with the competencies and abilities of the person(s) to whom duties are assigned, and must provide appropriate supervision. A dentist’s ultimate responsibility to his or her patient is not affected by the assignment of duties.

Profession specific regulations include a title and abbreviation section that stipulates a regulated member may use certain defined titles. Only members of that regulated profession can use the specified titles.

The *Dental Assistants Profession Regulation* Section 30 stipulates that the titles “registered dental assistant,” “dental assistant,” “R.D.A.” and “D.A.” can only be used by a regulated member of that College.

To be a regulated member, you must have the qualifications to be registered. If you have the qualifications to be registered, you must be registered.

There are many duties that a dentist may consider assigning to non-regulated individuals, including but not limited to, preparing the operatory for a procedure, cleaning the operatory after a procedure, reprocessing of dental instruments and devices for reuse and helping the dentist with some chairside tasks such as passing of instruments, preparation of dental materials and suctioning.

A non-regulated individual cannot use titles identified in a profession-specific regulation. For example, an individual who is not a member of the College of Alberta Dental Assistants cannot refer to themselves or be referred to as a “dental assistant”. The person cannot present themselves or hold themselves out as a dental assistant. A patient could be confused about the role of a non-regulated individual who is referred to as an “assistant”. As an example, if a patient is unsure about what title an individual has, the dentist has an obligation to be sure the patient understands what the person is and whether or not they are registered.

The appropriate use of titles by non-regulated individuals is essential and should be considered when addressing non-regulated individuals who are assigned duties to perform non-restricted activities. Titles that are not included in the profession specific regulation include operatory attendant and sterilization attendant.