

# Dental Assistant: A rewarding healthcare career in great demand

by Heidi Riley

“There is a large demand for Level II dental assistants on PEI and Canada-wide,” says **Wanda MacInnis**, Learning Manager, Dental Assisting program, Holland College.

“I get calls every week from dentists across the Maritimes looking for Level II dental assistants. There are currently not enough graduates to meet the demand of the industry.”

The Canadian Dental Assistant Association estimates there are about 26,000 to 29,000 dental assistants in Canada. Of the 20,000 dental assistants registered with a provincial dental assisting association, approximately 74 percent are certified/licensed as a Level II dental assistant, 99 percent are female, and the average age is 38 years old. About 150 dental assistants currently work in the dental assisting field on PEI.



**Wanda MacInnis**, Learning Manager, Dental Assisting program, Holland College.

## Duties on the job

Dental assistants (DAs) are dental health professionals who work closely with and under the supervision of a dentist. They perform tasks before and after the dentist meets with the patient, and assist the dentist during dental procedures.

## What does it take to be a dental assistant?

Along with the academic credentials, good communications skills and strong organizational skills are also important. “DAs must also be willing to continue to train to learn about new innovations and upcoming technology.”

## Wages

According to the Federal Job Bank at [www.jobbank.gc.ca](http://www.jobbank.gc.ca), the wages for dental assistants across Canada range from \$16 to \$31.20 per hour, with a median of \$21.50.

On PEI, wages for DAs range from \$15 to \$23 per hour. “Lower wages and lack of benefits seems to be a reason why many individuals are not staying in this field,” says Wanda.

“We hope to see wages and benefits increase, and then more individuals will be attracted to the profession and retention will be higher.”

## The importance of dental assistants

“Dental assistants are a key component in the treatments required for our patients,” says **Dr. Mike Connolly**, a dentist at the Belvedere Dental Clinic in Charlottetown, and President of the PEI Dental Association.

“We have seen a shortage of dental assistants on PEI within the last few years. We have been losing DAs to other jobs which offer higher wages and benefits.

“As dental professionals, we need to take more consideration in regards to wages and benefits for DAs and provide a good work environment, because they are an important part of the team. The Dental Association is working with Holland College to find a way forward.”



**Dr. Mike Connolly**, Belvedere Dental Clinic and President of the PEI Dental Association.

## The dental assisting program

Dental assisting programs provide training in such areas as microbiology and infection control, preventive dentistry, dental radiography, clinical assisting procedures, intraoral tasks such as taking x-rays and impressions, placing dental dams, and community dental health.

Holland College offers a 10-month accredited Dental Assisting program. Theory is delivered in a classroom setting. The clinical portion of the program is delivered in a clinic with fully functional dental operatories (working spaces), digital radiography units, and a dental lab. The program has a ratio of about 10 students per instructor. Students are also required to do two practicums during the 10-month program.

Graduates of the program must write a national board exam. Upon successful completion of the exam, they apply to the PEI Dental Council for a Level II license, which must be renewed every year.

## Student in the program

**Natalie Langille** is a student at the Dental Assisting program at Holland College. “After my first week in the program, I was excited,” says Natalie. “It clicked right away.”

“When I did my first practicum, I shadowed a dental assistant. I liked the unpredictability of adjusting when something unexpected happens. After observing my first extraction, the dentist said she had never seen a student get so close to a month. I wanted to see everything.”

“The program has a lot of theory, and you have to focus and put in the work to succeed. Having a science or math background makes the theory easier to understand. I would definitely recommend this program to others. I’m not even working yet, and I love it already.”



**Natalie Langille** is a student in the Dental Assisting program.

## Dental assisting proves to be a rewarding and ever-changing career

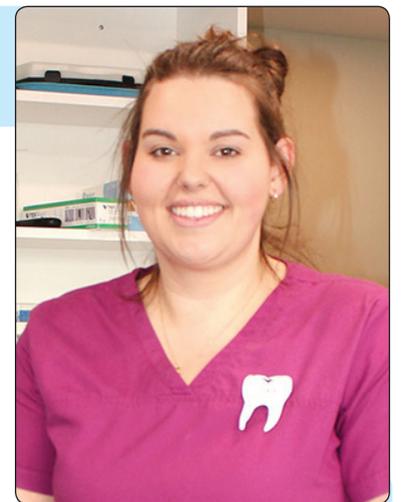
**Zoey Phillips** graduated from the Holland College Dental Assisting program in 2016, did five weeks of on-the-job training at Belvedere Dental Clinic in Charlottetown, and has worked there ever since.

“I am very people oriented, I am a very scheduled person, and I like knowing what is coming up next. The variety of work is great – it is not just doing one thing all day.”

Zoey arrives at the office at 7:30 am and starts seeing patients at 8. “We see 20 to 30 patients a day. I plan for each patient’s appointment. The key to dental assisting is to know what is coming next and what instrument will be needed, so you are always one step ahead.”

Zoey agrees there is a shortage of dental assistants, and says about half of her graduating class has gone on to pursue a career in dental hygiene. “For me, assisting is a better choice, because there is such variety in what we get to do in the course of a day.”

“I would recommend this career to anyone who is interested. I really love what I do,” says Zoey. “I get to meet a lot of interesting people and see a lot of interesting things.”



**Zoey Phillips** is a dental assistant working in Charlottetown.

## Advice to those considering this profession

Spend a day observing in a general practice dental office and speak with a dental assistant to get an idea if this job is for you.

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For more about the **Holland College Dental Assisting** program, visit [www.hollandcollege.com/programs/Dental%20Assisting.html](http://www.hollandcollege.com/programs/Dental%20Assisting.html)

For more information about this career, visit the **Canadian Dental Assistants Association** at [www.cdaa.ca](http://www.cdaa.ca)

For the full interviews, visit [www.employmentjourney.com](http://www.employmentjourney.com) and search **Dental Assistant**.



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