

# Training: an Australian perspective

With continuing professional development now becoming compulsory with the establishment of statutory registration, many dental nurses and dental nurse course providers are looking at the issue of training. **TERESA MULLINS** looks at this issue from the viewpoint of the current situation for dental nurses in Australia...

**A**DENTAL nurse requires sensitivity to the physical and emotional needs of patients, good communication skills and excellent organisational abilities. Dental nurses are important members of the dental team. They help maintain high standards of infection control, assist the operator during all oral health care procedures and may also be required to assist with practice administration.

In Australia, this member of the dental team is known as a dental assistant. Even though registration with Australian Dental Boards is not compulsory, most dental assistants undertake their basic Certificate III in Dental Assisting qualification. The dental assisting Certificate III and Certificate IV qualifications are competency-based and the learner has a reasonable expectation that they will be supported by their training organisation and their employer in their efforts to gain competency. For example, the qualification delivered by the Australian Dental Association in Queensland has a completion rate of between 80 to 85 per cent. It is estimated that a further five per cent will be successful once specific learner support is allocated directly to them.

## Competency standard

A competency standard is a nationally agreed statement of the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to perform a particular job or job role. The Certificate IV dental competencies, endorsed in the Australian Health Training Package, was developed to meet the identified training needs of the dental industry. They offer dental assistants a range of exciting extended duties and dentists are keen to utilise their dental assistants' skills to enhance the service provided by their practice.

Qualified dental assistants have always been able to undertake a Certificate IV qualification, allowing them to take dental radiographs in compliance with legal requirements. However, the range of electives in the new Certificate IV qualification will allow the dental assistant to select electives to address specific workplace needs.

The extended duties that dental assistants can legally undertake in Australia are determined by the State Dental Boards and these may vary from state to state. However, for Queensland dental assistants extended duties may include:

- Taking alginate impression for study models
- Taking clinical photographs
- Oral health promotion and saliva testing
- Constructing models, impression trays and registration rims
- Assisting with general anaesthesia and conscious sedation
- Practice administration.

In traditional or norm-referenced assessment a learner's performance is rated against that of other learners and the outcome is a rank order of achieve-

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ment. An assessment that compares learners with each other requires all learners to undertake similar tasks such as an examination or a classroom test.

## Achievement of competency

Competency based or criterion-referenced assessment measures a learner's performance against specified criteria and not against the performance of other students. It focuses on achievement of competency against learning objectives and even more importantly on providing the learner with the flexibility to give further evidence as their skills and knowledge develop as a consequence of the learning experience.

In Australia, assessment and training may be conducted at the workplace, off-the-job, at a training organisation, during regular work, or through work experience, work placement, work simulation or any combination of these. It acknowledges that people can achieve vocational competency in many ways by emphasising what the learner can do, not how or where they learned to do it<sup>2</sup>.

The traditional training route for a dental nurse leading to qualification, and registration with the GDC, has been assessment by an examination that is not competency based<sup>1</sup>. By contrast, the competency based assessment of vocational qualifications is the process of collecting evidence and confirming that the dental nurse has the skills, knowledge and attitudes to perform to the standards expected in the workplace, as described by the relevant unit of competency.

Many Australian communities are geographically isolated from their capital cities. Queensland, for example, covers 1,727,000km<sup>2</sup> and is more than seven times the size of the UK. This means that many dental assisting students must negotiate the challenges of learning in isolation. The delivery of training and assessment in these remote areas must be flexible and innovative.

## Integrated learning approach

Learning resources which support the delivery of a qualification must provide for variations in a student's learning style, cultural contexts and training environments. An integrated learning approach facilitates the transfer of learning between theory and practice and enables learners to be successful. These interwoven activities<sup>3</sup> include:

- Computer-based activities such as simulations, exercises and online assessments
- Individual activities such as reading and completing written self-assessment tasks
- Group activities such as solving problems with a

peer or conducting a project with another learner

- Class activities such as lectures, debriefing and discussions.

Key features of resources which accommodate an integrated delivery mode include:

- The organisation of learning resources so that complex ideas are explained as clearly and simply as possible
- The inclusion of clear objectives in learner guides and evidence portfolio so that the learner clearly understands what is required to demonstrate competence
- The use of a glossary and clear simple explanations with accompanying photos and diagrams
- Written and practical self-assessment activities which require active participation by the learner
- The use of appropriate dental terminology and good work practice examples
- E-learning resources including online tutorials, self-assessment and assessment activities.

The Dental Nurse Online resources facilitate an integrated learning approach. These learning resources are being successfully used in Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Wales and England.

## Ability to apply knowledge and skills

Compulsory registration for dental nurses has brought with it the opportunity for training organisations to review their delivery of training and assessment. Dental nurses should be considered competent when they are able to apply their knowledge and skills to successfully complete work activities in a range of situations and environments as measured against specified performance criteria.

## References

1. *Advanced Apprenticeship / Modern Apprenticeship in Dental Nursing England & Wales, AA&MA Dental Nursing Issue 1.1 Skills for Health, December 2007*
2. *Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council Health Training Package HLT07*
3. *Dillenber, Pierre (2006), Orchestrating integrated learning scenarios. ASCILITE 2006*

## About the Author

Teresa Mullins graduated from the University of Queensland with an honours degree in Dentistry. She is a registered dentist and a member of the Australian Dental Association. Teresa has worked as a dentist in both government dental clinics and private dental practices and has taught both dental assistants and dental technicians. Since 2000, Teresa has been developing The Dental Assistant Online and The Dental Nurse Online resource materials. In 2003 she was the dental representative on the Australian National Training Authority's advisory steering committee for the Health Training Package Assessment Project and in 2005 she was the technical writer for the dental qualifications during the review of the Australian Health Training Package.

