

STATUS, SATISFACTION AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

a national survey of dental technicians

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the results of a
recent survey of
dental technicians

Proposals for dental technicians to develop their careers and be further integrated into the dental team can only succeed if dental technicians enjoy their work, are valued in the dental team, and have opportunities for continuing professional development.

Given the lack of information on these issues at a national level, a team at Guy's, King's and St. Thomas' Dental Institute sent a postal questionnaire to all 1,650 dental technicians registered with the Dental Technicians Association (DTA) in 2002. Dental technicians were asked about their working hours, job satisfaction, perceived status in the dental team, and continuing professional development. Sixty per cent of recipients replied.¹

The survey sought to fill in some of the gaps in our current knowledge and draw attention to issues that affect the recruitment and reten-

tion of key members of the dental team at a time of development and change in the profession.

Working hours

The majority of dental technicians were working in excess of 40 hours per week and 28% were working more than 50 hours per week. Only 7% worked part-time.

Keeping up-to-date

Most dental technicians kept up-to-date by reading professional journals such as *The Dental Technician*. Only a third of dental technicians reported attending one or more in-house or external courses during the preceding year. Only 2% of dental technicians were taking a career break for study purposes, indicating that the vast majority of professional development is integrated into working life.

Dental technicians were asked about their working hours, job satisfaction, perceived status in the dental team, and continuing professional development.

Feeling valued in the dental team

Just under 50% felt that as individuals, they were valued members of the dental team most or all of the time. Only 20% perceived dental technicians as a group to be valued most or all of the time (Table 1).

Box 1

Factors relating to job satisfaction

- Being an older technician
- Attending courses
- Feeling valued in the dental team
- Lower working hours
- Future career plans

Satisfaction with work life

On the whole, dental technicians were satisfied with their work life with 50% rating their job satisfaction as 8 or more, out of a maximum score of 10 (Fig. 1). However, 10% were very dissatisfied with their work life. Significant factors relating to job satisfaction are shown in Box 1.

Table 1 Perception of being a valued part of the dental team

	All of the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	Seldom	Never
Individual	16%	31%	32%	16%	5%
Group	3.5%	16%	44.5%	28.5%	7.5%

Looking to the future

When asked about future career plans, 30% expected to be in another career (9%) or retired (21%) in 5 years' time. Most dental technicians expected to be in the same job or with the same employer in 5 years' time, and only 27% expected that their career as a dental technician would develop over the next 5 years (Table 2). No dental technicians suggested that they planned to undertake further training to become clinical dental technicians.

What do the findings suggest?

The fact that most dental technicians expected to remain in the work force in 5 years' time, and that half had high job satisfaction is encouraging as the profession moves forward into a new era.

Findings giving concern were the long working hours, the lower levels of job satisfaction in young technicians, the perception that dental technicians as a group are not valued in the dental team, low expectations of

career development, and the prospect of 30% technicians leaving the workforce within 5 years.

Given that members of the DTA are probably the most committed to and/or satisfied with their career, the situation in the rest of the industry where unqualified process workers make up to 70% of the workforce may be even more concerning.

After registration with the General Dental Council, dental technicians will be required to undertake verifiable continuing professional development (CPD). The low attendance at courses indicated by this study is therefore a concern. This may be due to a variety of reasons. As most dental technicians are not working within the mainstream NHS, they do not have access to NHS funds for training and development. The meeting of production deadlines and long working hours mean that CPD may be given a lower priority. The perception of poor career prospects may also be a factor in low levels of CPD activity.

Figure 1 Levels of job satisfaction expressed by dental technicians

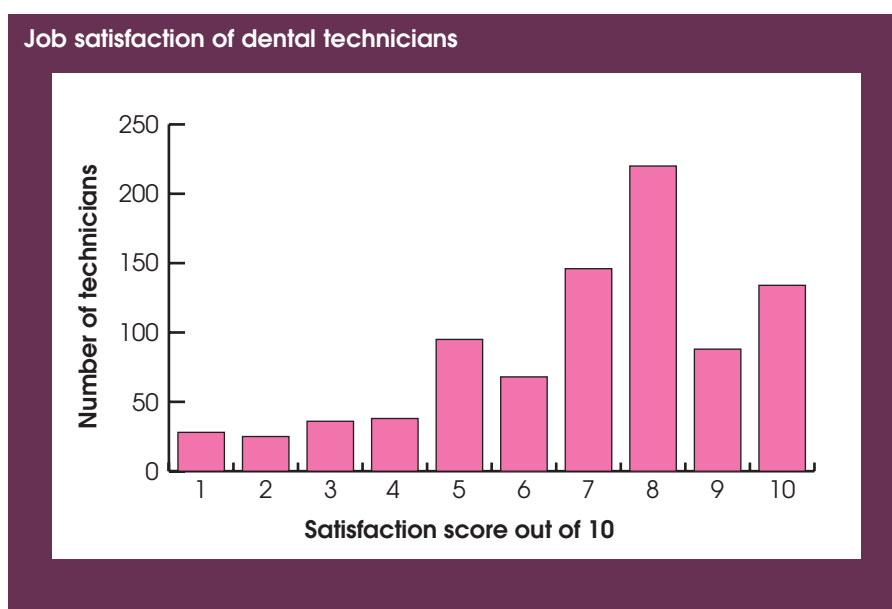


Table 2 Comparison of levels of job satisfaction according to future career plans

Expected role in 5 years' time	% technicians	Average satisfaction score
Retired	21%	7.57
Owning own laboratory	18%	7.03
In another career	9%	4.98
In current job	44%	7.09
In better job with current employer	9%	7.08
Working overseas	1.5%	6.69
Other	1%	7.50

There is little data on availability of suitable courses. While other surveys have identified a shortage of training places for gaining formal qualifications,² it is clear that there is an urgent need to also examine the provision and funding of courses for CPD purposes. A partnership between employers, manufacturers, professional bodies, dental hospitals, higher education and further education colleges has been suggested as one way forward for developing education and training for dental technicians.³

50% of dental technicians rated their job satisfaction as 8 out of 10

The high levels of job satisfaction were surprising given reports of other problems such as low pay and investment levels, fees for NHS laboratory items being driven down, and the findings in this survey of poor career prospects and long working hours. However, the positive association between

job satisfaction and the perception of being valued both as an individual and as a professional group in the dental team, is to be expected. This survey highlighted a particular problem of dental technicians as a professional group not feeling adequately valued in the dental team. A recent report in *Vital*⁴ discusses some reasons for this, and suggests ways forward such as developing face-to-face communication between the practice and the laboratory, and sharing information between the dentist and technician. The development of team-based training at an undergraduate level may also encourage teamwork, mutual respect and good communication as professional norms.

It has been suggested that the funding for NHS laboratory items is a barrier to a good relationship between the dentist and dental technician as low fees drive down the quality of work.⁴ It is of particular concern that the proposals for changing the system of commissioning and remuneration of NHS dental services from April 2005 do not provide much scope for raising the fees for NHS laboratory items. If anything, it is possible that dentists will do less laboratory work under the new system, which may be financially detrimental to laboratories that primarily deliver NHS services.

Looking ahead

The study has highlighted some important issues that have to be addressed if plans for

dental technicians to develop their careers and be further integrated into the dental team are to succeed. Improving the status of dental technicians in the dental team is a priority. Dental technicians are key members of the dental team and must be at the centre of future plans for reforming dental training and systems of remuneration.

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