

# From Cakes to Cavities: A Dental Assistant's Sweet Journey



(Mrs. Patterson is pictured posing in purple in her support for the fight against domestic violence)

Name: **Tracy A. Patterson**

Position: **Dental Technician/Assistant (DA)**

Location: **Hampton VA Medical Center:  
Dental Clinic**

Education: **Associates in Dental Hygiene**

## Education/Certifications/Experience

- Associates in Dental Hygiene
- X-ray technician certification (must-have for Virginia)
- Certified dental technician
- 20 years in the dental field

## Her Journey

Mrs. Patterson was inspired to go into the medical field due to her affinity for *helping people*. She says, “I hadn’t originally thought about going onto the dental field but I knew I wanted to help people but just not as a nurse.”

When her husband got stationed in Germany, Mrs. Patterson at 27, moved to stay with her husband. In the states, she was a cake decorator so the job wasn’t something that just transfers over to a new country. Just like Mrs. Patterson dependents often lose their jobs when they move with their spouses. To combat this the military offers college courses to dependents to further their careers. In Germany, she attended school to obtain her associates in dental hygiene and spent over 300 hours *volunteering* for the American Red Cross on base. After her husband’s time was up in Germany they both moved back to the States.

## The Job:

Dental health is very important and Mrs. Patterson was surprised to find out how much your dental health can showcase other health issues. This is also the most challenging part of the job for her. Mrs. Patterson explains, “When a patient comes in and you’re checking out someone’s mouth and see lesions in their mouth it is most likely linked to cancer and sitting there

when the doctor tells them can be really heartbreaking.”

On the brighter side of the job, Mrs. Patterson talks about how amazing working at the Va Hospital is when it gives her the chance to hear veteran’s stories. She even got the chance to talk with one of the original Tuskegee airman’s sons. He told her about how his dad brought him around the very hospital she works at.

### **On the Job: Roles and Responsibilities**

The most important role to her is patient care. A dental assistant is one of the first faces the patient sees and their position is vital to helping the patient get the care they need.

- Check out the medical history of patients to perform **safe and proper care**
- Set up for X-rays and exams
- Check each patient’s vitals
- Set up the proper materials for medical procedures
- Works along with doctors for assistance

### **Advice/Tips for students going into the medical field**

- “Dental care is hard, it is a job that you have to like/love to do if you want to go into it. Being in someone’s mouth is more personal than one would think.”
- “If you go into the dental field, go into a practice that has all of the dental practices to get the most experience. If you plan of furthering your career it is a great opportunity to be trained in many aspects of dentistry. That is something that I get to do at the VA but some general dentist will have to send you to a specialist. This helps further your

career by having experience in many fields.”

- “Pay attention to anatomy to anatomy in school it is very important to your job even in the dental field.”



### **Funny Stories/ Experiences on the Job**

- “Sometimes when you triage patients they will bite on your fingers and they things. A triage starts with vitals, find out their medical conditions, ask how to help/ if they are in pain, and then they received an x-ray. This is to inform the doctor of the patient’s condition.”
- “When interns/residents first start working they often take one look in people’s mouths and start to dry heave and throw up.”
- “Sometimes when patients are super nervous they will ask you to hold their hand and when I first started I always wanted to console the patients but they would squeeze my hand so hard it’d practically be blue.”