

Western Piedmont recruits dental assistants

By LETA PARKS
News Herald Staff Writer

Burke County dentists are looking for assistants to help them keep the county free of dental problems.

"It's been a chronic shortage for several years now," said Dr. Cliff Stamper as he discussed the lack of dental assistants throughout the county.

"I think it's probably not only this area but statewide," he added.

While the Burke County area has 19 dental assistant positions waiting to be filled, Western Piedmont Community College will only produce 11 graduates this year to fill the need, said Naomi Smith, coordinator of the college's Dental Assisting Program.

"Last year, our program graduated 14 students to fill 33 openings," she said. "This current shortage reflects a trend that has been increasing for some time, and does not appear to be slowing. Qualified dental assistants in our area are in a position to virtually choose their own jobs."

One reason Stamper gave for the shortage of

dental assistants was a high burnout rate, with many dental assistants only lasting about two years in the field, he said, adding he was not sure why the burnout rate is so high.

Smith attributed the shortage of dental assistants partly to the fact that many jobs which have been traditionally held by men are now open to women.

"Also, as is always true in the health fields, salaries in the past have been less than ideal," she said.

But Burke County dentists are responding to the need by increasing salaries and benefits to levels which will help them compete with industry for more personnel, said the WPCC dental assisting coordinator.

Dental assistants perform many duties to help dentists do a better job of taking care of their patients, said Stamper.

"There's lots of things they can do; they can be very, very helpful to a dentist," he said.

Some of the duties the assistants perform are placing topical anesthetics, placing temporary crowns, placing rubber masks on the patients and taking x-rays, Stamper said.

One of the ways Stamper has fought the dental assistant shortage is by offering tuition help to people wanting to become dental assistants, he said.

Also, he and other dentists have donated money to scholarship programs to help students study dental assisting at WPCC, said Stamper.

The Morganton dentist serves on the advisory board for the Dental Assisting Program at the college, he said. As part of his role on the board, "we've gone to the high schools and done programs," said Stamper.

The dentist also serves on WPCC's vocational education advisor program, he said.

The shortage of dental assistants may be hard on dentists, but it is good for people in the dental assisting field, Stamper said.

"Compensation for dental assistants because of the shortage has increased to where I think it's a very good situation economically for a young lady to go into, or a young man, either one," said the dentist, adding the field is just as suitable for men as it is for women.

Area dentists need assistants

★ From page one

Another Burke County dentist said he has not had as much of a problem finding dental assistants as other dentists in the area.

"We've been lucky," said Dr. John Fish, who practices in Hildebran. "I think that in a progressive office, if the atmosphere is nice and the staff is nice, the better employers are more likely to get the pick of the litter."

Finding dental assistants, "has not been a major problem for me, knock on wood," said Fish.

But even though he has not had problems filling dental assistant positions, "I do know there are dentists in the area who have had a hard time finding dental assistants," he said. "Just because I haven't had it (trouble finding dental assistants) doesn't mean it's not a problem."

A dental assistant can bring in as much as \$15,000 per year after a few years of experience, Fish said.

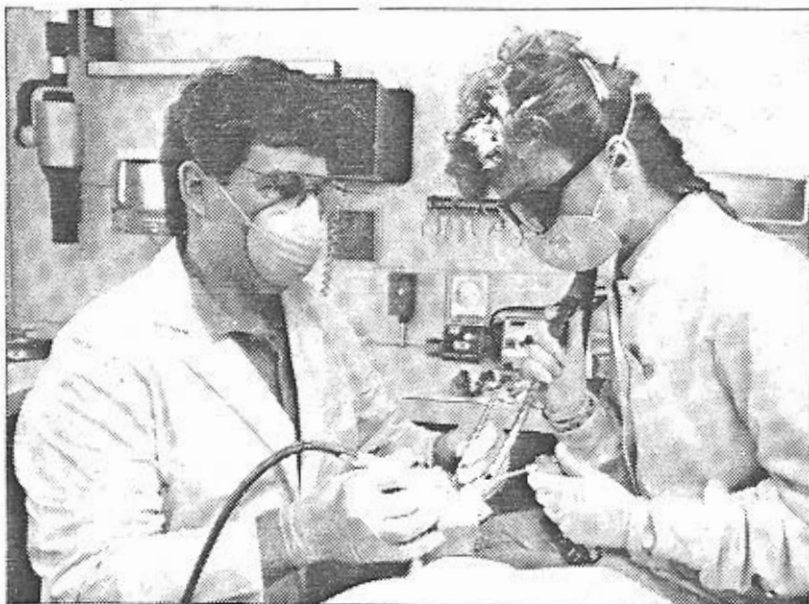
Students interested in becoming dental assistants may apply for a 12-month dental assisting program at WPCC which provides instruction in, "all areas of the dental office including chairside skills, business and laboratory procedures, preventive dentistry and patient motivation," college officials said.

The training helps prepare students for the Dental Assisting National Boards, an examination that they must pass in order to become Certified Dental Assistants.

"A CDA is permitted to perform expanded duties, which makes him or her a more valuable asset to the dental office," said WPCC officials.

In addition to the program offered at WPCC, Fish suggested two other alternatives for people who are interested in a dental career.

"A dental assistant does not have



In WPCC's dental assisting program, students receive hands-on training in the college's dental lab. Dr. Paul Ohle (left) teaches student Amy Bowers.

to be trained in a formal program," said Fish, adding a dentist could train someone to become a dental assistant.

Another dental career some students might consider is becoming a dental hygienist, said the Hildebran dentist.

A student must earn a four-year college degree to become qualified as a dental hygienist, Fish said, adding they can earn as much as \$20,000 to \$25,000 a year.

"Dental hygienists are really in short supply," said the dentist. "They can write their own ticket right now."

The college is currently accepting applications for the Dental Assisting Program, which is scheduled to begin in September. For more information on the program, call Smith at 438-6130.