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Pennsylvania Gives Dentists and Dental Hygienists Alternatives to Live-Patient Clinical Licensing Exam During COVID-19 Emergency

Summary:

Dentistry is one of the only health-related professions that still requires a licensure examination involving a live patient. For more than a century, such examinations have provided the means for graduates of dental schools and dental hygiene programs to demonstrate their ability to provide independent care and for examiners to assess their clinical competence. Each year, thousands of people volunteer as test subjects and receive treatment during clinical licensing examinations for dentists and dental hygienists.

Individuals seeking licensure as **dentists** in Pennsylvania must graduate from an accredited dental school and then pass both the written National Board Dental Examination AND a *clinical dental examination* administered by one of five regional testing agencies. Similarly, individuals seeking licensure as **dental hygienists** in Pennsylvania must graduate from an approved dental hygiene program and then pass both the written National Board Dental Hygiene Examination AND a *clinical dental hygienist examination*.

Five regional testing agencies across the United States administer these clinical examinations. One of the testing agencies is the Commission on Dental Competency Assessments (CDCA). CDCA administers the American Board of Dental Examiners (ADEX) clinical dental exam and the ADEX clinical dental hygienist exam.

The ADEX dental clinical exam consists of:

- A computer-based “diagnosis and treatment planning” component – the *Diagnostic Skills Examination, Objective Structured Clinical Examination (DSE OSCE)*.
- Two simulated clinical exams which involve conducting procedures on dental “manikins” – the *Endodontic Clinical Exam* and the *Fixed Prosthodontic Clinical Exam*.
- Two clinical examinations performed on live patients – the *Periodontal/Scaling Clinical Exam* and the *Restorative Clinical Exam*.

The ADEX dental hygienist clinical exam consists of:

- A computer-simulated, knowledge-based section designed to assess diagnosis and treatment planning – the *Computer Simulated Clinical Examination (CSCE OSCE)*.
- One clinical examination – the *Patient Treatment Clinical Examination (PTCE)* – which requires hygienist candidates to perform treatment on a live patient in order to evaluate their clinical and judgment skills.

It is well-accepted by now that the practice of dentistry during the coronavirus pandemic is risky. COVID-19 can spread through saliva particles that become airborne. According to the Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention (CDC), saliva particles or respiratory droplets released during dental services can easily enter another person's mouth or nose.

To reduce the spread of COVID-19, schools and non-essential businesses have been closed throughout the country, including sites where professional licensing exams are administered. Many licensing examinations have been postponed or cancelled indefinitely. As a result, students about to graduate from dental schools and dental hygiene programs are presented with a difficult dilemma: They cannot receive a license from the state to practice their profession until all licensure examination requirements have been met, yet they are unable to sit for the examinations because schools, clinics and test sites are closed. Moreover, certain examinations require them to perform dental procedures on live patients – an activity which at this time raises obvious COVID-19 concerns and would be contrary to the various closures, stay-at-home orders and social distancing requirements implemented during the pandemic.

Therefore, the Pennsylvania Department of State requested, and Governor Wolf approved, several waivers/suspensions related to the clinical licensure examinations for both dentists and dental hygienists who have just graduated or are about to graduate. For prospective dentists:

- **The *periodontal/scaling* portion of the clinical exam has been waived.**
- The State Board of Dentistry is allowed to temporarily **accept a substitute for the live-patient restorative (filling) component of the dental clinical exam.** Specifically, the board has the authority to accept the ADEX non-patient-based restorative dentistry exam administered by CDCA and CITA for the 2020 administration of the clinical dental exam. This exam makes use of ADEX's CompeDont manikin tooth – a technology that allows candidates for licensure to be tested for clinical competency in a manner that is valid and psychometrically sound. By eliminating the need for a live patient, it provides a much safer way during the pandemic for licensure candidates to demonstrate readiness to practice.

CDCA, which is recognized and accepted by 47 state dental boards, is in the process of securing examiners for testing sites now, in anticipation of commencing testing once re-opening is allowed. The other regional testing agencies are believed to be in the process of developing their own versions of a restorative examination using a manikin tooth.

Candidates may still opt to take the live-patient restorative exam if they wish. For example, if the candidate has already taken and passed the live-patient portion, or the candidate wishes to wait until test sites have re-opened and the live-patient exam has been made available again, the board will accept the results of the live-patient exam.

As part of this same waiver, the board has been granted permission to accept *any other non-patient-based restorative dentistry examination* developed/offered by the other three regional examining bodies, provided that the board finds them to be psychometrically sound, valid, reliable and legally defensible.

For prospective dental hygienists:

- **The requirement that candidates pass the patient treatment clinical exam (PTCE) is temporarily suspended.** This suspension will remain in place until either patient-based clinical examinations can safely resume, or a non-patient-based clinical exam is developed for hygienists. (Any non-patient-based clinical exam for hygienists will have to first be accepted by the board as psychometrically sound, valid, reliable and legally defensible).
- As they await resumption of the PTCE, **dental hygienist candidates who have satisfied all other requirements of licensure may apply for a provisional license** from the department. The

provisional license will allow these individuals to practice until it is safe for them to take the patient-based examination or until a manikin-based clinical examination for hygienists becomes available.

For dental hygienists who wish to apply for a **local anesthesia permit**, a provisional license will satisfy the requirement that they hold “a current license in good standing.”

These waivers will enable dental school graduates to stay on roughly the same timetable for employment during the COVID-19 emergency that they would normally be on, while still ensuring that dental licenses are granted only to individuals who have demonstrated clinical competency. Dental hygienists who obtain provisional licenses can stay on track and begin to practice until it becomes safe again to take the required clinical competency exam.

These waivers, and any provisional licenses issued, shall extend for the duration of the COVID-19 emergency, plus an additional 90 days thereafter.

For more information, please contact the [State Board of Dentistry](#).