

Dental Assistant interview questions

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What to expect

Dental Assistant interviews usually mix practical questions about sterilisation and chairside routine with softer questions about patient handling, since the role sits right between clinical support and front-of-house service. Interviewers, often the practice manager or a senior dentist, are checking that you can follow infection control procedure without prompting and stay calm when the day gets busy or a patient is upset.

- **Process:** Questions about instrument preparation, sterilisation and chairside routine, checking you know the sequence and can explain it clearly.
- **Behavioural:** Questions about past experience with patients or team members, usually looking for evidence of calm, practical patient care.
- **Scenario:** A hypothetical situation, such as a distressed patient or a running-late dentist, to see how you'd handle pressure and prioritise.
- **Client-facing:** Questions about reception, billing and payment handling, since the role covers front-of-house as well as clinical work.
- **Safety and compliance:** Direct questions on infection control standards and how you'd apply them day to day.

Most interviews start with a short chat about your background and qualifications, move into a walk-through of your sterilisation and chairside routine, then shift to scenario and behavioural questions about patient handling. Many practices finish with a tour of the surgery or a short practical task, such as demonstrating instrument setup, before discussing availability and pay.

1. Walk me through how you prepare and sterilise instruments before a procedure.

Why they ask

This checks whether you know the correct sequence and understand why each step matters for infection control, not just that you can recite it.

How to structure your answer

Answer as a step-by-step walk-through: start from instrument collection after the previous patient, through cleaning, autoclave loading and cycle checks, to final setup for the next appointment.

Example answer

"After each patient I clear the tray, rinse instruments to remove debris, then run them through the ultrasonic cleaner before loading the autoclave. I check the cycle settings match AS/NZS 4187 requirements and log the sterilisation record once it's done. Before the next patient I set up a fresh tray with everything the dentist needs for that specific procedure, so there's no delay once they sit down."

2. Tell me about a time you managed a difficult or anxious patient.

Why they ask

Patient comfort is a core part of the role, and interviewers want evidence you can de-escalate without needing the dentist to step in.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: describe the situation, what was expected of you, the specific action you took, and the result for the patient and the appointment.

Example answer

"A patient came in for a filling and was clearly nervous, gripping the armrests before we'd even started. I slowed down, explained each step before I did it and let her know she could raise her hand any time she needed a break. She used that a couple of times, and we finished the appointment without needing to reschedule. She mentioned at the front desk afterwards that the explanation had helped."

3. A patient arrives visibly distressed and the dentist is running behind schedule. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests judgement under pressure and how you balance patient welfare against practice flow.

How to structure your answer

Answer by setting out your immediate priority, then how you'd manage the competing pressures, then how you'd communicate with the patient and the dentist.

Example answer

"I'd take the patient somewhere quieter than the waiting room if possible and ask what's upsetting them, since it might be pain rather than nerves and change the urgency. I'd let the dentist know briefly so they can decide whether to see that patient sooner. Meanwhile I'd let other waiting patients know there's a short delay so nobody feels ignored."

4. What infection control standards do you follow in a dental practice, and how do you make sure you're meeting them?

Why they ask

Infection control is non-negotiable in this role and practices need to know you won't cut corners under time pressure.

How to structure your answer

Answer directly: name the relevant standard, then describe the concrete checks you do to stay compliant.

Example answer

"I follow AS/NZS 4187 for sterilisation and the practice's own infection control policy for PPE and surface cleaning between patients. I keep a log of autoclave cycles and spot-check that seals on sterilised packs haven't been compromised before use. If anything looks off, like a failed indicator strip, I hold that batch back rather than risk using it."

5. How would you handle a patient who disputes their bill or payment amount?

Why they ask

Front-of-house duties are part of the role, and practices want to see you can handle money conversations without damaging the patient relationship.

How to structure your answer

Answer with a short process: how you'd listen, check the details, and resolve or escalate.

Example answer

"I'd first listen to what they think is wrong rather than assuming they're mistaken, then pull up the treatment record and item numbers to check against what was charged. If it's a straightforward error I'd correct it on the spot. If it's a bigger dispute, like a disagreement over what was quoted, I'd bring in the practice manager rather than trying to resolve it myself."

6. Describe a time you had to adapt quickly during a busy day in the practice.

Why they ask

This checks flexibility and whether you can keep the clinical and administrative sides of the role running when things don't go to plan.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: the situation that disrupted the normal flow, what you needed to sort out, the action you took, and how the day settled.

Example answer

"One morning two patients arrived early while I was still sterilising instruments from an emergency appointment that had been added in. I prioritised getting one tray ready straight away for the dentist to start, explained the short delay to the second patient, and caught up on the paperwork and scheduling once the morning rush eased. Both patients were seen without a long wait and nothing got missed in the records."