Early in my veterinary career I enjoyed many aspects of my daily work in general practice, but I became hooked on dentistry once we purchased equipment for and started routinely using dental radiology in 2001. It was this experience that sparked my interest and led me to earn the title of Veterinary Technician Specialist (VTS) in dentistry.
Dentistry was more interesting than just taking a dirty mouth and cleaning it up. I became aware of how often we were underdiagnosing our patients and sending them home with the same dental disease with which they arrived. Becoming proficient in obtaining full-mouth dental radiographs was a challenge. However, I was determined to master this new task. I wanted to improve our efficiency and patient advocacy.

I began working to obtain the VTS (Dentistry) credential in 2005 and sat for the Academy of Veterinary Dental Technician’s (AVDT) board exam in June 2008. Thankfully, I passed the test on the first try and, shortly after that, received the news that I had earned the title of VTS (Dentistry). At that time, I was 1 of 23 people to have the title. Now, we stand at just over 100 worldwide. My professional experiences in veterinary medicine became more diverse after that. You may not always receive a large raise in pay at your hospital. However, this achievement can open the door for opportunities in teaching, lecturing, and writing, along with the recognition as a subject-matter expert.

**WHAT IT TAKES**

The credentialing process to qualify for the exam consists of a minimum of 2 years of work. You will be logging cases in different categories, such as endodontics, orthodontics, prosthodontics, periodontal therapy, radiology, local anesthesia, equipment and instrument care, and maintenance and general dentistry skills. You will also need to attend continuing education (CE) and hands-on laboratories to gain knowledge and experience in those specific categories.

Some of the requirements to satisfy the credentialing process include the following:

- To apply to start the 2-year process, you must be credentialed and in good standing (LVT, RVT, CVT, LVMT, or the equivalent in your country).
- You must have worked as a credentialed veterinary technician or veterinary nurse for a minimum of 3 years and have accumulated a minimum of 6000 hours in practice after passing the Veterinary Technician National Examination (VTNE) or its equivalent in your country.
- You must have spent at least 2000 of those 6000 hours before your application in the practice of dentistry within the last 2 years before your application with the AVDT.
- Once you apply to the AVDT, you will need to acquire at least 3200 hours of work in veterinary medicine over 2 years; during this time, you will need to attest that at minimum 2780 hours are in the practice of dentistry. Practicing dentistry is not simply when a patient is under anesthesia; the time also includes taking care of patients during recovery, maintenance of equipment and instruments, discharging patients, client education, dental homecare, and more. Your hospital manager and the managing veterinarian will attest to your time spent as well in writing to the AVDT.
- You will be logging cases that you participate in to meet a minimum number of cases in several dental disciplines; some of those cases will need to be acquired while observing and participating with a Diplomate of the American Veterinary Dental College (DAVDC).

I traveled to Seattle, Washington, and Portland, Oregon, to work with 3 different boarded dentists to acquire expertise on advanced cases that we did not do in my hospital. In addition, I had an official mentor who had already achieved the VTS (Dentistry) title. He was there to help me and answer questions I had throughout the process, even though he lived in Texas and I was in Washington. Unfortunately, most mentors and candidates do not live or work near each other. However, mentor pairs can communicate via email, virtual calls, and in person annually at the Veterinary Dental Forum, where most of the advanced dental continuing education is offered each year.

Once you have completed the 2 years of acquiring cases, attending CE sessions, and writing case reports, you will submit everything to the credentialing committee of the AVDT by December 31 of that final year. The committee reviews it all very carefully, and if all requirements are satisfactorily met, they will qualify you to sit for the written examination offered in August of each year. This examination is carried out virtually. In addition, you will progress to the practical...
SPECIALTY SPOTLIGHT

examination offered during the Annual Veterinary Dental Forum in the fall when you pass the written exam. If you pass both examinations, you will then be given the title of VTS (Dentistry). If you do not pass, you have up to 3 attempts at the examination within 5 years. There are credentialing requirements to maintain your VTS as well as annual dues to maintain good standing as a VTS (Dentistry).

WHAT IT COSTS
There is a cost to achieve this designation. Financially, you or your employer will need to pay for your required continuing education; you may need to take days away from work to complete your advanced casework. In addition, you will need to be working full-time during the process; the hours requirement is stringent, so if you face unexpected circumstances during the 2 years, you may ask for an extension. The AVDT refers to the Family Medical Leave Act to help grant extensions for medical reasons and other situations that may arise. You will also be writing 5 publishable case reports as part of the credentialing process.

THE BENEFITS OF A VTS (DENTISTRY) DESIGNATION
Obtaining a VTS (Dentistry) does not qualify you to be an oral surgeon or extract teeth. Currently, there are not any specific practice act stipulations regarding VTS titles in the United States. The AVDT does not support veterinary nurses performing these tasks, which veterinarians are licensed to perform; if found to be performing extractions in any state, veterinary nurses could have their VTS credential removed by the AVDT.

The VTS in dentistry shows your commitment and excellence in veterinary dental skills that are appropriate for a veterinary nurse. This designation has undoubtedly opened doors for me regarding teaching, lecturing, writing, and recognition as a true subject-matter expert. You may be interested in working in the veterinary dental specialty with a diplomate of the AVDC or teaching in a program of veterinary technology or university educating undergraduate veterinarians.

When I first went to school to become a veterinary nurse, I never dreamed of where this career would take me. Starting my own business to consult and teach veterinary professionals how to perform dentistry procedures has been a dream come true for me. I can only help so many animals in my own hands, in my practice. When I teach other hospital teams, I influence others to be the best they can be and extend my impact exponentially. I am an advocate for our patients in a meaningful way that creates changes within our practices.

You do not need to lecture, teach, write, or work in a specialty practice once you obtain your VTS (Dentistry). However, the opportunities exist and are there for you if you are inclined to take them.

Benita Altier
Benita is a licensed veterinary technician as well as a veterinary technician specialist in dentistry. She began her career in veterinary technology in 1988 and has worked in small animal general medicine, ophthalmology, equine and llama neonatal care, canine reproduction, and dentistry. Benita is the current president-elect for the Academy of Veterinary Dental Technicians and the secretary for the Washington State Association of Veterinary Technicians. She has co-authored 2 textbooks on veterinary dentistry for veterinary nurses as well as published several articles in professional journals. Through her business, Pawsitive Dental Education LLC, she has provided professional dental instruction and consultation to veterinary hospitals and conferences across the United States, Canada, and China since 2008. Giving back to the profession and helping veterinary nurses grow their careers in ways they never thought were possible is something she is very passionate about.