Dental informatics students take most of the same courses as other trainees, but have a track of nine didactic credits for their specialty. All of them participate in dental informatics research from the first day in the program. Early research experiences typically occur as part of a group mentored by one or more faculty members, while subsequent research, such as the MS project or PhD thesis, becomes increasingly independent.

Research projects are chosen from a broad range of topics. Most of our research involves clinical informatics and thus is focused on the application of computers in patient care. PhD student Jeannie Irwin is currently working on a grant-funded project to develop a natural language interface to electronic dental records, which will make it possible for dentists to record findings and planned treatment without using complex computer commands. Dr. Humberto Torres-Urquidy is working on reference terminology for dental findings and diagnoses, while Dr. Amit Acharya is developing an information model for patient records in general dentistry. Other research projects include the design of an electronic dental record centered on the cognitive requirements of clinicians, 3-D visualizations, the development of a virtual community for people interested in dental informatics, and systems to help biomedical researchers find the most appropriate and qualified collaborators.

The program prepares individuals primarily for research and teaching careers in dental informatics; other career options include positions within larger dental care delivery organizations, such as group practices and independent practice associations to support the application of computer technology. Dental software developers, such as dental practice management system vendors, also require the expertise offered by dental informatics specialists.

Trainees come from a wide variety of backgrounds. While some are dentists, that is not a precondition for admission. The mix of individuals from different backgrounds ensures that many different ideas and viewpoints come to bear on solving scientific problems.

For U.S. citizens and permanent residents, financial support from the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) is available. The NIDCR funds provide a stipend, tuition, fees and health insurance support, travel subsidies, and a state-of-the-art computer. These positions are highly sought after and admission is very competitive. The program also offers a limited number of positions for self-funded trainees. Typically, we have approximately three to five dental informatics trainees in the program at any one time.

So how do you decide whether this program is for you? If you like to innovate, be in control of technology (rather than being controlled by it), and would like to contribute to improving dentistry and dental care using technology, this program is for you. You should have good analytical skills, and either quantitative or qualitative abilities. A background in programming and/or information technology is a plus because although informatics is not just about computers, we use them a lot in our day-to-day work.

Additional information about the program is available at di.dental.pitt.edu/postgrad.php. We are currently looking to fill several trainee positions. For any questions, please contact the program director, Dr. Titus Schleyer, at titus@pitt.edu.