

PRACTICE ADVISORY

The Practice Advisories of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario contain practice parameters and standards which should be considered by all Ontario dentists in the care of their patients. It is important to note that these Practice Advisories may be used by the College or other bodies in determining whether appropriate standards of practice and professional responsibilities have been maintained.

Most Responsible Dentist

INTRODUCTION

General dentists are usually responsible for providing comprehensive dental care and creating and maintaining long-term relationships with patients. The relationship begins with an initial assessment, examination, development of a treatment plan, and initiation of treatment within the practitioner's expertise, as determined by their education and experience.

Treatment plans are often influenced by the patient's attitude to dental care, financial resources and existing conditions of the dentition and periodontium. In some instances the treatment plan will require a referral to a dental specialist for consultation and/or treatment.

Where referrals to specialists are involved, it is important that all practitioners strive to maintain the continuity and quality of patient care. As such, the general dentist should remain the primary coordinator of care for the patient.

As in many aspects of dentistry affecting patient welfare, communication is critical to solving problems and avoiding complications arising from treatment provided by more than one practitioner.

Each dentist involved in the patient's care should have a clear understanding of the other treating dentist's role. Communication and collaboration are imperative in providing optimal patient care and treatment outcomes.

With the patient's consent, the general dentist and specialist should develop a mutually agreeable protocol to ensure continuity of care for the patient. Under these circumstances, it is reasonable for the specialist, patient and the general practitioner to acknowledge that the general dentist is "the most responsible dentist" or "coordinator" in the patient's ongoing care.

This responsibility remains even during a phase of treatment when the patient is undergoing care from a dental specialist to whom the general dentist referred the patient.

In some instances, a general dentist may choose to refer a patient to a more experienced general dentist for consultation and/or treatment. It is understood that the principles and protocols in this Practice Advisory should also apply in these situations.

OBLIGATIONS OF THE REFERRING GENERAL DENTIST

Patients may need to be referred to a specialist for a variety of reasons. The general dentist is expected to recognize when specialist care is more appropriate for the patient's needs and completion of the treatment plan and refer appropriately.

Reasons for a referral to a specialist may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- the referring dentist's skill and comfort levels
- the complexity of the case
- the treatment plan objectives
- the patient's medical condition
- specialized equipment and/or tests
- staff training and skill level
- the patient's wishes

In order to facilitate a smooth transfer of a patient from a general dentist to a specialist the referring general dentist should observe the following steps:

1. Upon a decision to refer a patient to a specialist, the general dentist has an obligation to inform the patient of the rationale for the referral and the procedures and protocols involved. These include the reason and purpose of the referral, the expected nature and scope of the procedures involved, and the anticipated outcome of the referral and treatment.
2. Referrals from a general practitioner to a specialist may include, but are not limited to, the following documentation:
 - the patient's name and contact information;
 - relevant treatment and background information;
 - relevant medical conditions or concerns;
 - clear instructions on the nature and scope of the referral;
 - clear direction on the expectations of the referring dentist;
 - relevant materials such as radiographs, laboratory reports, models and other specialist reports;
 - any other information that would assist the specialist in the assessment of the patient.

3. Referral instructions should note the referral treatment required and that, on completion of the services requested in the referral, the patient be encouraged to return to the general practitioner for continuing comprehensive care.

OBLIGATIONS OF THE DENTAL SPECIALIST

The dental specialist has a responsibility to provide consultation and treatment for patients while ensuring that the procedures performed are in compliance with the overall treatment plan and goals established by the general practitioner and patient.

The following protocols should be followed in order to deliver optimum treatment and provide continuity of care for the patient while maintaining professional etiquette between dentists who share responsibilities for patient care.

1. Treatment provided by the specialist should be limited to the issues outlined in the referral. If the specialist determines that additional or alternative treatment is recommended or required, she/he should discuss these issues with the patient and the referring dentist before proceeding with treatment.
2. If the specialist, upon reviewing the referral note and patient consultation, feels that the treatment outlined by the referring dentist is not in the patient's overall best interest, then she/he should communicate with the referring dentist and the patient to resolve the issue.
3. The specialist should not duplicate and charge for procedures already performed adequately by the referring dentist.
4. The specialist should provide the referring dentist with a detailed consultation report, including a diagnosis, treatment options, and an account of all treatment rendered or recommended. Reports should be provided in a timely manner.
5. The specialist should provide the referring dentist with relevant diagnostic quality copies or duplicates of radiographs or digital images taken by the specialist.

6. The specialist should provide the referring dentist with relevant copies of any diagnostic test results, consultation letters or other information obtained.
7. If the specialist believes that continued treatment over the longer term is necessary or desirable, the general dentist should be consulted about this decision and receive regular treatment updates and reports. The specialist should also discuss with the referring dentist when the patient is expected to return to her or his practice for continued treatment or maintenance.
8. If the specialist believes it is necessary for the patient to be seen by another dental specialist, the general dentist should be consulted prior to the referral being made and, when appropriate, be involved in the choice of the specialist who will conduct the proposed consultation and/or treatment.
9. In cases of inter-specialty referrals, the general dentist should receive detailed consultation reports and an account of all treatment rendered or recommended by the specialists.
10. When the requested treatment has been completed the specialist should ensure there is provision for the patient to return to the referring general dentist, unless the patient expressly requests differently without prompting or persuasion from the specialist.
11. Self-referrals by patients to specialists may occur without the oversight of a general dentist. When this occurs, the specialist should take reasonable steps to ensure that the patient is aware of the pitfalls of not having a general dentist oversee their comprehensive dental care and try to direct the patient accordingly.

Dentists should recognize that there are many specific circumstances when patient needs, convenience and resources must be taken into account as part of the referral process.

It is understood that the relationship between general dentists and specialists should be governed by mutual respect and professional etiquette. Trusting relationships should be fostered between the general dentist and specialists who treat her/his patients.

In all instances, general dentists and specialists should have the best interests of their patients as their primary concern.