

Use of Complementary and Alternative Therapies in Dental Practice

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.

Introduction

There is growing interest among the public in the use of complementary and alternative therapies for the management of a wide variety of health problems and, more generally, to improve wellness. Frequently, this involves self-care.

Health-related therapies may broadly be divided into conventional (“Western”) therapies, and complementary and alternative therapies. Conventional therapies are based on a modern conceptualization of disease and informed by scientific study. Complementary and alternative therapies include a diverse group of practices that are founded on various theories and beliefs, may not have a scientific basis, and their teaching is largely absent from the curricula of schools of medicine and dentistry. The boundaries between the two are not absolute and some specific complementary and alternative therapies, like acupuncture and herbal remedies, are being incorporated as an adjunct to conventional practice.

As they are becoming increasingly popular, patients may seek advice about complementary and alternative therapies or express a desire to consider therapeutic options that involves them in their dental care. Some dentists believe that complementary and alternative therapies are appropriate options to consider, whereas others regard them as controversial. In some instances, the use of complementary and alternative therapies may create ethical dilemmas, particularly if the dentist’s values conflict with those of the patient.

This Practice Advisory is intended to assist members in determining when and whether it is appropriate to incorporate complementary and alternative therapies into their practice.



The paramount responsibility of a dentist is to the health and well-being of patients. In this regard, a dentist has professional, ethical and legal responsibilities to act in the best interests of patients, respect their autonomy, and refrain from exploitation.

A dentist must always act within the scope of practice of dentistry and the limits of her/his knowledge, skill and judgment. A dentist must never provide care that is beyond her/his expertise and competence¹. This expectation applies equally to therapies that a dentist recommends and those that patients request.

IMPORTANT:

A dentist must always act within the scope of practice of dentistry and the limits of her/his knowledge, skill and judgment.

It should be emphasized that patients have the right to make health care decisions that accord with their own values, wishes and preferences. This includes decisions to pursue complementary and alternative therapies, either as an adjunct to or instead of conventional therapies. The College expects that a dentist will respect patients' decisions, even those with which the dentist may disagree. In discussing such matters with patients, a dentist should always provide his/her professional opinion in an accurate and objective manner, which should be supported by sound clinical judgment and informed by scientific study.

Dentists Who Wish to Use Complementary and Alternative Therapies

A dentist who wishes to use complementary and/or alternative therapies is expected to do so competently, in keeping with his or her professional, ethical and legal obligations.

Prior to providing any therapy, a dentist must obtain relevant and comprehensive information about the patient's condition, consistent with the conventional standards of practice of the profession. This includes obtaining medical and dental history, conducting an appropriate clinical examination, taking necessary radiographs and performing tests as required.

A dentist must formulate a conventional dental diagnosis. If a dentist also formulates a diagnosis related to a complementary and/or alternative therapy, it must be based on the information obtained about the patient's condition, supported by sound clinical judgment and informed by scientific study. A diagnosis that does not satisfy these requirements is not acceptable.

¹ See O. Reg. 853/93 Professional Misconduct, enacted under the Dentistry Act, 1991, section 2, sub-section 5, which defines professional misconduct as: "Treating or attempting to treat a disease, disorder or dysfunction of the oral-facial complex that the member knows or ought to know is beyond his or her expertise or competence."

Any therapeutic option that is recommended by a dentist must:

- have a logical connection to the conventional diagnosis;
- have a reasonable expectation of remedying or alleviating the patient's condition or symptoms; and
- possess a favourable benefit to risk ratio, based on the merits of the option, the potential interactions with other therapies the patient is receiving, the conventional therapeutic options available and any other considerations the dentist deems relevant.

A dentist must never recommend a therapeutic option that has been proven to be ineffective through scientific study.

The provision of any therapy must be authorized by a patient's valid informed consent. In order for patient consent to be informed, a dentist must always provide accurate and objective information about the available therapeutic options, including their associated benefits, risks and costs. A dentist must never inflate or exaggerate the potential therapeutic outcome that can be achieved, misrepresent or malign the proven benefits of conventional, complementary or alternative therapies, or make claims regarding therapeutic efficacy that are not substantiated by scientific study².

IMPORTANT:

A dentist must never recommend a therapeutic option that has been proven to be ineffective through scientific study. A dentist must never provide care that is beyond her/his expertise and competence.

Treating Patients Who Wish to Use Complementary and Alternative Therapies

In order to provide safe and effective conventional care, a dentist must have relevant and comprehensive information about a patient. This includes information about any complementary and alternative therapies that the patient may be pursuing or wish to use.

A dentist should inquire about patient use of complementary and alternative therapies on a regular basis. This may involve incorporating questions about such therapies into the medical history and/or as part of a clinical examination for specific conditions or ailments.

Where a patient is pursuing complementary and/or alternative therapies, a dentist should note this fact in the patient's record, along with any details of the therapy the patient is able to provide.

² See O. Reg. 853/93 Professional Misconduct, enacted under the Dentistry Act, 1991, section 2, sub-section 12, which defines professional misconduct as: "Making a misrepresentation about a remedy, treatment, device or procedure or failing to reveal the exact nature of a remedy, treatment, device or procedure following a patient's request to do so", as well as section 2, sub-section 13, which defines professional misconduct as: "Making a representation about a remedy, treatment, device or procedure for which there is no generally accepted scientific or empirical basis."

When asked for information about complementary and/or alternative therapies, a dentist must respond in a professional manner, within the limits of her/his knowledge, skill and judgment.

A dentist may wish to consider whether he/she can assist a patient in obtaining accurate and objective information about the complementary or alternative therapy in question. This may involve suggesting potential resources or referring the patient to other practitioners, where doing so is in the best interests of the patient and will support informed decision making.

A dentist is not expected to be knowledgeable about every complementary or alternative therapy her/his patients may be pursuing or wish to use.

If a dentist is aware that a patient is receiving a complementary or alternative therapy, he/she should consider this fact when determining the conventional therapeutic options that may be suitable. In particular, a dentist must consider whether any potential negative interactions may arise between the conventional therapeutic option and a complementary or alternative therapy, and take reasonable steps to assess whether a negative or otherwise adverse reaction may arise.

Where a dentist is unable to determine the potential exists for a negative or adverse interaction, he/she must communicate this to the patient and include a corresponding notation in the patient's record. Consultation with and/or referral to the patient's physician may be indicated.

Many resources were used in the development of this RCDSO Practice Advisory, most significantly the Policy Statement on Complementary/Alternative Medicine of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO) and the Practice Guideline on Complementary Therapies of the College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO). We acknowledge and are grateful to the CPSO and the CNO for their support.



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