



# Referrals are good business

**R**eferrals benefit patients and doctors and have a ripple effect that is advantageous to both. Frequently, the referring doctor finds that both the patient and the specialist will reward him by referring others to his care. Of course, the ultimate winner is the patient, who receives a higher level of care because his general practitioner referred him to a specialist. Referrals are made for various reasons, including a second opinion, clarification of an uncertain diagnosis, expertise needed for a complicated procedure, access to cutting-edge technology or to help a patient achieve increased form and function.

Primarily, patients want to know that the most skilled practitioner is treating them, that the treatment will be relatively painless and that it will not unduly disrupt their lives.

What this means is that clinical and administrative staff must treat the patient efficiently. How quickly they are seen is at least as important as the treatment they receive. In both instances, patients are evaluating both

the practitioner who made the referral and the doctor who provides treatment.

A general dentist performs some similar procedures to those performed by the specialist. Results obtained from the general dentist should be as good, if not better, than those obtained by the specialist. Obviously, it is more beneficial if treatment can be delivered without the patient visiting another location. But we know that this is not always possible and that sometimes a referral is a good call.

When you refer a patient to a specialist, you are telling your

patient that the quality of care is your primary concern.

For example, undiagnosed and untreated periodontal disease has resulted in too much litigation. Many of these unfortunate situations could be averted with a periodontal referral. Usually the doctor making the referral has a high level of confidence in the referring doctor. Similar patient care philosophies, trust and

communication are all necessary. When patients are happy with their specialist, they are also happy with their general dentist. This can generate more patient referrals for both the dentist and the specialist.

However, the specialist must confer with the referring dentist. I have heard many dentists rightfully voice discontent when their patients have received care without their input. Keep the general dentist in the loop. One of the most satisfying things I experience, as the specialist, is getting to know many high-quality dentists. Interacting with colleagues on a personal level has many great benefits. Lifetime friendships have been established through the referral process. A good referral also reinforces the dentist-patient relationship and bond.

Preferential treatment of the patient again is fostered from both the dentist and the specialist. It also creates freedom for the referring dentist to do more of what they are very good at. This also eliminates the possibility of having an unexpected outcome from doing an infrequent procedure.

Specialists also refer patients to general dentists. We see many unattached patients in our office. Business transfers, out-of-towners and college students find their way to our OMS office without ever having seen a general dentist in the area. Many of these patients need a good general dentist. We refer to the dentists and other specialists in whom we have the highest confidence.

The referral process is complex. The roles of the participants change. Patients can change from being referred to referring others when they are happy and well cared for. Family, friends and co-workers have a way of wanting similar care or procedures.

The referral process works well when patients' expectations are met or exceeded. However, when patients are dissatisfied the resultant negativity is far more detrimental to all. The problems that result from an unhappy patient are exponential rather than cumulative. If this unfortunate situation arises, it must be addressed with the utmost diligence.

Referrals are good business. They benefit all involved and, in my opinion, patient care is elevated. ■

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