

Beginning with the Endo in Mind

How to Start a Relationship That Can Benefit Your Practice

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As you embark on your career as a general practitioner, you may encounter a number of patient cases that weren't covered fully in your dental school practicum. For example, you may graduate with minimal exposure to difficult root canal treatments - making the establishment of a relationship with a nearby endodontist a crucial consideration as you build a practice.

The advanced training endodontists receive, along with their experience in administering anesthesia, adoption of emerging technologies such as digital radiography and operating microscopes, and daily exposure to root canal treatment, gives them a high success rate with even the most challenging cases. As a result, they can be valuable partners in delivering quality patient care.

"I spent my first eight years after dental school as a GP," says David Hansen, D.D.S., an endodontist in Iowa City, Iowa. "When I came out of dental school and started performing endodontic procedures, I quickly realized how little I knew."

As a general practitioner, taking on only those cases you can treat successfully is important to your long-term reputation. And should you be presented with a difficult treatment situation, it's good to have an endodontist experienced in handling these situations you can turn to for advice. Furthermore, a strong relationship with an endodontist can also free you from dealing with emergency situations, giving you more time to focus on restorative and cosmetic procedures.

First Contact

Establishing such a relationship can be as simple as a phone call. "I've found that most endodontists are happy to set up a time to meet," says Dr. Hansen. "Ultimately, it's in their best interest." Endodontists rely on general practitioners for more than 85 percent of their referrals, making relationships with dentists vital to their success.

To identify endodontists with whom you might want to work, you can rely on word of mouth, a phonebook or the "Find an Endodontist" search engine on the American Association of Endodontists (AAE) Web site at www.aae.org. But as the new dentist in town, it's important that you be the one to initiate contact.

"A working specialist might be so busy that they may not even be aware of your practice until you're six months in," says Michael Lowery, D.M.D., an endodontic resident at Tufts University in Boston. "In contrast, you'll be developing your practice, and networking will help you become established."

If there are multiple endodontists in your area, it's a good idea to arrange meetings with several of them. That way, you can choose the endodontist who best meets your needs, and you'll also have a backup plan if the specialist you normally use is unavailable.

"Generally, I look for someone who's technically excellent, treats patients like friends or family, and gets them in quickly," says Jeff Chamberlain, D.D.S., a general practitioner in Santa Rosa,

Calif. "Location is also a factor. I'm not going to refer my patient to an endodontist 30 miles away if I have four or five within the city."

Starting the Dialogue

When you meet with endodontists, let them know that you're interested in receiving referrals so they know to mention your name to patients looking for a general dentist. You should also talk to them about the mechanics of the referral process to ensure the patients you refer receive seamless care.

These initial topics are a good way to start a relationship that can prove to be long and fruitful for both parties. The key is remembering that the endodontist is not just a resource to be used in emergencies, but a partner in delivering quality patient care.

"My endodontist and I talk about many cases," says Stephen D. Davis, D.D.S., a general practitioner in Santa Rosa, Calif. "I'll send him a note or a question I have about a patient, and we talk on the phone a lot. That's the main thing we do to keep the relationship going. He'll call with reports on my patients post-treatment and let me know what's going on. When the patient comes in and tells me how it went, the response is almost always positive."

By working with an endodontist to turn a difficult procedure into a positive experience, you'll build your patients' trust in dental care - and it's that trust that will keep them coming back for years to come.