

Good Referrals, Like Good Relationships, Depend on Communication

How to Work With an Endodontist to Provide Seamless, Quality Care

Endodontists are valuable partners to new general practitioners. Their advanced training, vast experience with endodontic procedures and anesthesia, and use of emerging technologies enable them to tackle difficult root canal treatments with great success and minimal patient discomfort. By referring these cases, you ensure that your patients receive the kind of treatment that reinforces your reputation for delivering quality care. But the referral itself is just the first step – ensuring seamless treatment that minimizes chair time and creates a satisfying overall experience for the patient requires several additional actions on your part.

Before Treatment

Explaining the reason for the referral – that the endodontist is a root canal specialist with the expertise to offer successful treatment with minimal pain – is key to a good referral. A thorough description of the referral process and root canal treatment lets patients know what to expect and comforts them so they approach the procedure without trepidation.

Dentists also should have current information on hand regarding the endodontist's usual and customary fees, as well as a list of insurance plans accepted by the practice. All of this information can be obtained from the endodontist's front office staff. The GP should share these details with patients before they arrive at the endodontist's office.

After the dentist's recommendation for a referral and the treatment's cost have been explained to the patient, the dentist should confirm the endodontist's availability. Endodontists are accustomed to treating patients in severe pain, so they're generally able to see patients in a timely manner. But it's still a good idea to have other backup endodontists in mind for emergency treatments should your regular endodontist be overbooked or on vacation.

Prior to the patient's arrival at the endodontist's office, the general practitioner should provide the endodontist with all details relevant to that particular case. "It's important for general practitioners to recognize the endodontist's role as a partner in the treatment planning process," says David Hansen, D.D.S., an endodontist in Iowa City, Iowa. "I've frequently received referrals that say something like 'root canal No. 30,' with no further information – making it necessary to call the GP for key details about the treatment and restoration plan while the patient is waiting."

The best way to convey this information is through the referral form that endodontists typically provide to GPs. In emergency cases, this information can also be shared over the phone or by fax. Details that should be included are:

- information about the overall restorative plan, including treatment provided by the general dentist, whether it's acceptable to remove the crown because the GP will replace it, and whether a temporary crown should be placed;
- post requirements, including whether one is needed;

- details regarding any crown lengthening requirements; and
- advance notice regarding special patient considerations such as a limited opening, a need for anxiety control, complex medical conditions or an easily triggered gag reflex.

Information about patients who need premedication, such as with heart murmurs, artificial valves and some people with artificial joints, is critical.

“Some patients require a dose of antibiotics an hour before they arrive at the endodontist’s office - if they don’t take it, the appointment has to be rescheduled, inconveniencing both the specialist and the patient,” says Dr. Hansen. “But if the dentist mentions this detail on the referral form, we’ll call the patient the day before with a reminder.”

Post-treatment Care

Once the root canal treatment is complete, the endodontist will tell the patient to contact the general practitioner as soon as possible to get the tooth restored. The endodontist generally provides a prompt report back to the general dentist that includes when the treatment occurred, what treatment was provided and any special considerations for the restoration process. The general dentist can then adjust the treatment plan for the tooth if appropriate, or complete the treatment of the tooth.

In the end, working closely with an endodontist throughout the treatment process can really pay off for all parties. “I’ll often ask the patient questions about how it went at the endodontist’s when they return to my office to get the tooth restored,” says Robert Huot, D.D.S., a general practitioner in Framingham, Mass. “I can’t think of any time the feedback hasn’t been favorable.”