

And the Specialist Makes Three

Interdisciplinary Treatment: The view from the patient's perspective

By Suzanne Boswell

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When referring patients to other practices, good communication among all parties is crucial

It was a horrible experience," Donna proclaimed to a recent focus group of dental patients. We were discussing what happens when doctors refer patients to other practitioners. "Dr. Jones told me I needed to see a periodontist about some kind of gum problem and he gave me the doctor's business card. I trust Dr. Jones, so I went to the periodontist even though I didn't totally understand what the problem was. That's when the situation turned bad."

The general dentist's office did not contact the specialist about the referred patient. And the specialist did not contact the general dentist after Donna made her appointment. So, when Donna arrived at the office, the periodontist knew nothing about her case. When he asked her to describe her problem, Donna didn't know what to say. She felt foolish.

Before long, her embarrassment turned to irritation, then distrust as the specialist described a condition far more serious than she'd envisioned. "Dr. Jones had told me none of this," she said, "so I questioned how serious it could really be." She then became angry with Dr. Jones for sending her on what she thought was a wild goose chase. "I went back to Dr. Jones and asked him to explain what was going on!"

The frustration Donna shared with the focus group was familiar: We frequently hear such complaints among patients. And it all boils down to one issue: communication.

An intricate relationship

Referring patients to specialists is one of the most common, yet potentially intricate, communication challenges in a practice. It requires all parties to "be on the same page." When handled correctly, this exchange can boost the practice's image in patients' minds; they are receiving the necessary treatment and they feel well cared for. But, as in Donna's case, if communication between the two practices is poor, it

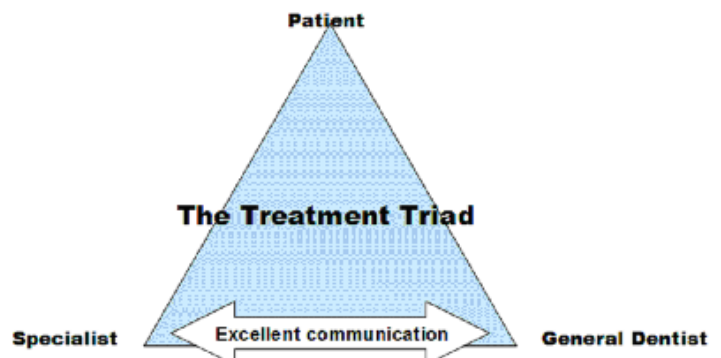
can leave the patient feeling uneasy and, ultimately, alienate him or her.

In focus groups, we found an interesting pattern among patients with a higher dental IQ, or those who were highly educated about their oral health. These patients placed increased value on the general practice that refers to specialists when the condition calls for specialized treatment. Their perception was that the general dentist recognized the situations in which specialized treatment was indicated and these patients did not feel compromised. This often resulted in increased trust of the general dentist.

But, for the experience to be positive, each doctor must assume responsibility for making the process as smooth as possible, and for ensuring that each party understands the patient's condition and treatment options. When that occurs, there is greater likelihood of patient satisfaction with both dental practices.

The treatment triad

From information we have gleaned in focus groups, we developed a model that we call the "Treatment Triad." It is represented by an equilateral triangle. The patient is at the apex of the triangle and the base represents the relationship between the general dentist and the specialist. As long as the practitioners effectively communicate, the foundation of the triangle is strong and provides the necessary support for the patient.



When communication between the practitioners is weak, the foundation is weak, and a patient's belief in both practitioners weakens. In extreme cases the patient's trust is shaken and the relationships collapse. Sometimes, it is left to the patient to relay information between doctors. That information may not be accurate and it may be colored by the patient's frustration with the situation. Another danger is that poor communication leads to lack of understanding, and, ultimately, the patient's failure to accept needed treatment.

In many discussions I've had with doctors, I've learned a great deal about the factors that weaken the communication among practitioners. These issues boil down to trust. Some repeated comments include:

- "I refer patients to the specialist then I never see the patients again—the specialist 'steals' them away from me."
- "The general dentist doesn't give the referred patient enough introductory information about the condition or about our [specialty] practice. It's pretty hard to provide treatment under those circumstances. And sometimes the patients never even follow through on the referral."
- "The general dentist doesn't send me case information/X-rays of the patient."
- "The specialist doesn't contact me after seeing my patient to advise me on the proposed treatment. I'm left out of the loop."
- "The specialist doesn't encourage the patient to return to my care, or doesn't support treatment I've presented to the patient."

In a worst-case scenario, a patient may verbalize his or her unhappiness with one practitioner to the other practitioner ... how professionally practitioners handle those complaints also can color patients' perceptions. Although there are many other scenarios, the bottom line is this: When communication between doctors suffers, the patient suffers too.

In my Mystery Patient seminar I address the most important factor in practice success—trusting relationships. The issue of trust influences the likelihood of treatment acceptance, patient retention and patient referrals. And once again, it is trust that influences the success of the relationship between the specialist and the general dentist.

How patient preferences benefit practitioners

Interestingly, what the patient wants in support and communication from both practitioners is also what most benefits the practitioners. Consider the following from the patient's perspective:

1. When the general dentist provides introductory information to the patient about the specialist, the patient's respect for both practitioners increases.
2. When the general dentist provides preliminary information about the condition and proposed treatment options, the patient is more likely to pursue the needed specialty treatment.
3. When the general dentist calls the specialist to

These 5 viewpoints clarify the mutual benefits to patients and to practitioners when there is excellent interdisciplinary communication

advise about the referred patient, and if the specialist lets the patient know this has occurred, the patient feels better cared for and has more respect for both doctors.

4. When the specialist's office sincerely affirms to the patient the positive relationship with/or confidence in

the general dentist's office/team, the patient feels greater security in both professional relationships.

5. When the specialist confirms or endorses the treatment plan(s) of the referring dentist, the patient feels increased trust in the general dentist.

Most importantly, throughout the communications between practitioners and with patients, the words spoken must be sincere. Anything that smacks of insincerity can appear manipulative and can send mixed messages to patients.

Good communication is vital for successful professional and patient relationships. As one patient put it, "I was shocked and very pleasantly surprised when the endodontist told me that my general dentist had called and sent information on my history. They had discussed my condition before I got there. I felt like I was in the hands of two really caring practitioners. It helped me relax and feel more confident during the treatment." This is a perfect example of an effective Treatment Triad.

Top Tips for Patient-friendly Referrals

Preferences derived from our patient focus groups

- Patients like when they receive from the general dentist a tangible referral tool (such as a referral slip) or the specialist's brochure along with a strong endorsement by the general dentist for the specialist. (A copy of the patient's reference slip should be mailed or faxed to the specialist also.)
- Patients want preliminary information about the condition to come from the general dentist before they will consider going to the specialist. Their trust of the general dentist increases with adequate understanding and preparation of what to expect from the recommended specialist.
- Patients appreciate when the staff of the general dentist helps to make contact with the specialty office. Offer to have staff initiate the call and establish the referral. The patient can then set the appointment time on the same phone call. This increases patient understanding of the importance of treatment, strengthens trust in both practices and sends a message of quality service of the general practice.
- Patients want to know that practitioners have discussed the patient's condition and treatment prior to the patient's visit to the specialist. This becomes evident to the patient when the specialist advises the patient of information or X-rays received from the general dentist.
- Patients respond positively when, after the treatment, the specialist indicates that he/she will contact the general dentist to discuss treatment outcomes. On return to the general dentist, acknowledgement that the discussion occurred between practitioners is reassuring to the patient and increases patient trust.

Rants and Raves:

What patients love and hate about referral relationships

Comments made by patients in our focus groups

- "The doctor told me I needed to see a specialist and gave me a business card. I didn't see any reason to go to a specialist because I didn't have any pain. I think the two doctors were in cahoots. I didn't go to the specialist and I never went back to the general dentist again."
- "I was really impressed when I got to the specialist's office and she knew all about my condition. She told me my general dentist had called her to discuss my condition. I felt like I was well-cared for because they'd talked before I got there."
- "I go to both the periodontist and general dentist often. The staffs know each other and the doctors like each other. It feels like they are all part of the same practice even though they're not even located in the same building!"
- "The general dentist had a note he got from the specialist about my surgery and knowing that the general dentist had received information about my treatment made me feel good about both doctors."

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