Why Consult a Dental Specialist?
Keeping up with the ever-expanding volume of scientific knowledge is an almost overwhelming task. Few, if any, dentists can hope to keep pace with current advances in their areas of expertise without a significant commitment of time and effort through continuing education and professional literature. To further complicate matters, patients today are more consumer oriented and better informed than ever before. The dentist is often asked for further information on another “breakthrough” in modern dentistry, as seen on TV or publicized in any number of consumer publications.

Furthermore, no single person can be expected to be highly skilled at every procedure within the legal definition of dentistry. The least pressured doctors are those who limit their practices to their areas of expertise. They do not hesitate to refer a patient when a problem exceeds their knowledge and/or ability. Such a consultation is the appropriate method to seek information and help.

Appropriate referrals are part of complete, quality health care management. Dentists’ predoctoral training in oral diagnosis and treatment planning teaches them that referrals are an essential part of managing their patient’s healthcare needs. Dentists are expected to recognize the extent of their patient’s treatment needs and when referrals are necessary. Guidelines published by the ADA Council on Dental Practice address the mechanics of dental referrals. These assume the dentist has the requisite skill and knowledge in diagnosis and treatment planning to determine when a referral is needed. To download the order form for these Guidelines, log on to www.ada.org/prof/resources/topics/dentalpractice.asp.

The referral process is an integral part of dental practice. These guidelines place special emphasis on communications and facilitating and improving the referral process.

Situations or Conditions Necessitating A Referral
Patients may need to be referred for several reasons. Any one or combinations of the following situations or conditions may provide the dentist with appropriate rationale for referring a patient:

- level of training and experience of the dentist
- dentists’ areas of interest
- extent of the problem
- complexity of the treatment
- medical complications
- geographic proximity of specialists
- patient load
- availability of special equipment and instruments
- staff capabilities and training
- patient desires
- behavioral concerns
- desire to share responsibility for patient care

Dentists who practice in small communities may find they are the only practitioner in the area. They will most surely be requested to stop by and see hospitalized patients with oral complaints. An understanding of the consultation/referral procedure and protocol is important in building a successful and effective practice. It is of absolute importance to your patients since their treatment is materially affected by clear transmission and reception of accurate information.

Elements of Dental Patient Referrals

Interprofessional communication needs
A dentist should only refer to another dentist with equal or greater skills or to a specialist. Dentists who initiate patient referrals should convey appropriate information to the other provider. That information should include name and address of the patient, reason for the referral, general background information about
the patient which may affect the referral and medical and dental information, which may include: medical consultations and specific problems; previous contributory dental history; models and images. You should also include projected treatment needs beyond the referral, urgency of the situation, if an emergency, and information already given or told to patient.

**Facilitating and Improving the Referral Process**

Personal knowledge of the specialist provider will allow patient needs to be met most appropriately. Dentists may wish to begin by looking for specialists with skills, knowledge, experience and caring attitudes that complement their own. Inquiries about the specialist’s training and experience, including their participation in continuing education and study clubs, may assist the dentist in determining where to refer particular cases. A visit to the specialist’s office to observe treatment may be helpful.

The primary referring dentist and the specialist should also discuss cooperative working arrangements that benefit patients being referred. Both practitioners should discuss the referral treatment period and the return of the patient to the primary dentist. This arrangement may be enhanced by an exchange of business cards, referral forms and patient instructional materials. Availability of the specialist for emergency treatment as well as mid-treatment referrals should be discussed. Images should be promptly forwarded to the specialist and returned to the primary dentist.

Encouraging a patient’s questions about the referral and responding in lay terminology can ease some of the fears associated with a referral. If language barriers exist, every effort should be made to ensure that the patient fully understands the reasons for the referral.

**Legal considerations**

While a dental license authorizes the dentist to practice all areas of dentistry to the extent allowed by state law, the dentist’s training may not be current with all advances in certain areas or the welfare of the patient calls for special skills. In such situations, the common law of the state may impose a duty to refer the patient to a specialist or another dentist with the special skills and experience needed.

Dentists should also recognize that separate and possibly conflicting legal interests may be involved during a referral. In reviewing provider agreements offered by dental benefit plans, particular attention should be directed to provisions of the contract regarding referrals. Any restrictions that may be placed on the dentist’s ability to refer patients to other settings or providers for care should be fully understood and accepted before the agreement is executed.

*Note:* In some situations, a dentist could be held legally responsible for treatment performed by referral dentists. Therefore, dentists should independently assess the qualifications of participating referral dentists as it relates to specific patient needs. *The dentist is reminded that contract obligations do not alter the standard of care owed to all patients.*

**Working with a specialist**

Find and use one or two practitioners in a given specialty whom you know personally and trust. You should feel comfortable with them and how their offices function.

Remember that the specialist may differ with you in deciding what treatment is indicated. If so, a phone call is in order so you can solve the problem. Remember, the specialist is legally obligated to the patient just as you are.

All dentists share a common goal — optimum patient care. A clear, concise, well thought out consultation request with the appropriate response will help assure quality care. There is no substitute for effective communication in any field of human endeavor. For more information, refer to the Council on Dental Practice publications *General Guidelines for Referring Dental Patients to Specialists and Other Settings for Care* and *General Guidelines for Referring Medically Compromised and Infectious Dental Patients.*
Practice Management Consultants and Other Advisors

Many dentists use the services of various experts who can provide specific advice on practice management, legal issues or tax interpretations. A dentist’s ability to select competent advisors is critical, in light of the increasing complexity of dental practice administration and management.

The following guidelines have been developed to help you select practice management consultants and other advisors. As such, the information is general in scope and does not cover every situation or detail. This does not imply that every dentist needs advisors. Rather, the guidelines are intended to supplement a dentist’s research necessary to determine the appropriateness of consultants and other advisors.

This information is not to be construed as legal advice, a legal standard or Association policy. As with any guidelines, these cannot serve as a substitute for a dentist’s own professional judgment.

Selecting advisors

Prior to selecting an advisor, the dentist should first determine and define the “desired practice objectives” and the specific area of need. Check the background education and practical experience of the advisor.

Match the advisor’s qualifications and experience with your needs. Look for special experience that may correspond with a particular problem.

Ask for references and follow up with telephone inquiries. Ask about the advisor’s ability to meet deadlines.

When you select an advisor, be sure you clearly understand and are comfortable with fees… fees and the methods of calculating, i.e., fee-only, commission or fee plus commission. Determine as well the nature of any reports that the consultant will provide, i.e., written or oral.

Types of Advisors and the Nature of Services

Practice management consultants*

These consultants provide advice on personnel management, equipment consultations, new purchases and leasing alternatives. They can also advise on billing and collection matters and give insurance assistance, as well as advice on appointment scheduling and telephone control. Public relations consulting and marketing advice are also available.

Facility management advisors can help with office layout and design, financial assistance in preparation of loan requests, ownership vs. leasing options, and rental and leasehold consultation.

Some financial management advice may be offered in the following areas:

- evaluation of practice overhead and expense analysis
- bookkeeping and payment policy assistance
- accounts receivable and cash flow analysis
- report preparation and budget information
- office and cash security assistance
- fee determination assistance
- tax assistance
- practice valuation
- buying/selling assistance and associateship consultations
- incorporation consultation
- group practice assistance-income division- incorporation guidance-group arrangements and dissolution assistance-associate consultations and document preparation
- insurance review

* The Directory of Practice Management Consultants and the Directory of Dental Practice Appraisers and Brokers are available online free to members at ADA.org.
**Attorneys**
Consult an attorney for legal advice, tax advice and financial advice.

For legal advice, an attorney can assist with practice formation, incorporation, contract development, wills, estate planning, retirement planning, real estate transactions, leasing arrangements and employment documents.

Tax advice from an attorney may include tax preparation assistance, contractual interpretations and tax implications, tax shelter analysis and tax planning.

Financial advice may include investment advice, insurance review and financial planning.

**Accountants**
Your accountant can provide advice on taxes, accounting systems and financial advice.

The accountant can assist with preparation and filing of tax documents, assist with tax reporting estimates, tax projections and tax planning, tax shelter evaluation and real estate matters.

He or she may advise on office systems, give financial records assistance and help with credit policy and office collections. Financial advice may include long-term planning, investment advice and insurance review.

**Insurance agent**
The agent will evaluate existing insurance policies, determine insurance needs and coverage limits and help with a cost analysis of group vs. individual policies.

**Bankers**
Financial advice a banker can be expected to provide includes information about practice loans, personal loans, checking and savings accounts and safety deposit boxes.

The banker can help in estate planning, providing information about trusts, wills, long-term investment planning and retirement planning.

**Associations for Professional Consultants**

**Financial Planning Association**  
Financial Planning Association  
5775 Glenridge Drive, N.E., #B300  
Atlanta, GA 30328  
1/800-945-4237  
[www.fpanet.org](http://www.fpanet.org)

**Institute of Certified Financial Planners**  
Institute of Certified Financial Planners  
3801 E. Florida Avenue, Suite 708  
Denver, CO 80231  
1/303-759-4900  
[www.fpanet.org](http://www.fpanet.org)

**National Association of Personal Financial Advisors**  
National Association of Personal Financial Advisors  
355 W. Dundee Road, Suite 20  
Buffalo Grove, IL 60089  
1/847-537-7722  
[www.napfa.org](http://www.napfa.org)

**American Association of Attorney-CPAs**  
American Association of Attorney-CPAs  
24196 Alicia Parkway, Suite K  
Mission Viejo, CA 92691  
1/714-768-0336  
[www.attorney-cpa.com](http://www.attorney-cpa.com)

**Society of Medical-Dental Management Consultants**  
Society of Medical-Dental Management Consultants  
3646 E. Ray  
B16-45  
Phoenix, AZ 85044  
1/800-826-2264  
[www.smdmc.org](http://www.smdmc.org)

**American Bar Association**  
American Bar Association  
American Bar Center  
750 North Lake Shore Drive  
Chicago, IL 60611  
312/988-5000  
[www.abanet.org](http://www.abanet.org)

**National Health Lawyers Association**  
National Health Lawyers Association  
1120 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 950  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
202/833-1100  
[www.healthlawyers.org](http://www.healthlawyers.org)

**National Association of Healthcare Consultants**  
National Association of Healthcare Consultants  
1255 Twenty-Third Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037-1174  
[www.healthcon.org](http://www.healthcon.org)  
202/452-8282