



Do your patients know you're a general dentist?

It isn't uncommon for Guild Insurance to hear complaints from patients alleging they weren't aware their general dentist wasn't a specialist or that they weren't given an option for a referral to a specialist prior to treatment commencing. All patients have a right to be fully informed of the treatment they're to receive and who will be performing this treatment. This means general dentists need to be sure their patients understand they aren't a specialist. Following are some tips to assist with this.

- > Don't make assumptions about what patients will understand. Without specific dental training and knowledge, what is obvious or common sense to a dentist won't be obvious or common sense to a patient. Dentists may at times actually be surprised at how little patients understand about dental treatment. Therefore, all conversations with patients need to be detailed, explicit and without assumptions.
- > It's easy to understand why some patients may make assumptions about dentists being specialists when they aren't; someone who does orthodontics is probably an orthodontist and a person who does endodontics is probably an endodontist. General dentists who are performing work that can also be done by a specialist need to have clear and explicit conversations with patients, so they understand the dentist is a general dentist who is able to carry out those treatments.

- > When a dentist explains to a patient that they're a general dentist and not a specialist, this conversation should include information about the patient's option to be referred to a specialist if they would prefer. The general dentist may believe that the treatment to be provided is well within their personal scope of practice based on their ability and experience, however patients still have a right to decide who they would like to be treated by. For them to make this informed decision, they need to be informed of the option to be referred to a specialist.
- > Not only should a general dentist inform a patient of their right to be referred to a specialist, they also need to be sure they're aware when a clinical situation is beyond their personal scope of practice and a referral isn't an option but a requirement. All dentists need to be clear on their personal scope of practice and therefore be able to recognise when a clinical situation is one where they should not be providing treatment. In these cases, it's imperative they don't provide treatment and instead provide the patient with information about where they can go for treatment.
- > It's not uncommon to hear of cases where a general dentist has recommended a referral and the patient has stated they would prefer to be treated by the general dentist they know and trust. While the desire to respect the patient's wishes is

understandable, a dentist's duty of care to the patient is paramount. The dentist has a responsibility to not treat when providing treatment would not be in the best interests of the patient. Therefore, when the clinical situation is beyond a dentist's personal scope of practice, they must refuse to treat that patient and not allow themselves to be convinced to provide treatment against their better judgement. Dentists will be held accountable for the treatment they provide; stating that the patient refused to be treated by someone else doesn't justify treating when it isn't appropriate.

- > Communication with patients needs to be explicit and not implied or suggested. This means when a dentist explains to a patient that they're a general dentist and not a specialist, they need to be very clear about the difference. This clear communication also applies to any advertising done by a general dentist. The Dental Board of Australia expects all dental advertising to be free from information which may be false, misleading or deceptive; therefore, advertising must in no way give the impression a dentist is a specialist when they aren't. This means avoiding terms such as specialising or specialises if the dentist isn't a specialist.

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