



Specialties in dentistry

Not so long ago, dentistry was considered a branch of medicine. Even nowadays, in some places, medicine is taught prior to formal dental education. Throughout the past few decades, dentistry has evolved significantly, allowing practitioners nearly everywhere access to advanced training and education, board exams, and specialization. General dental practitioners are exposed to all disciplines of dentistry and, in most countries, are allowed to perform related procedures. Unlike physicians who rarely perform procedures outside the scope of their field, dentists without formal specialty training perform minor surgeries, comprehensive periodontal care, endodontic treatment, and even some simple tooth movement. It appears that specialties in dentistry are tightly associated with the general practitioner. In fact, most of the time, general practitioners refer patients to specialists who perform specific procedures (for example, dental implant insertion, root canal treatment, or broad periodontal treatment). After receiving care from the specialist, the patient returns to the general practitioner to finalize treatment. The specialist performs a procedure that requires unique skills (and further training), while the general practitioner coordinates the treatment.

The communication between the general practitioner and specialist plays a critical role in a successful outcome. To accurately understand the treatment plan and goals, in my opinion, a specialist should have more than just a basic knowledge of general dentistry and must also be familiar with the services provided by specialists trained in other disciplines.

We must ask whether a dental school education provides the necessary knowledge of general dentistry—I believe the answer is no. Dentists should practice as general practitioners before they attend any specialty program, with the minimum requirement being 1 year of general practice residency. Not only will they better learn which discipline best fits their skills and character, but they will also be able to better understand treatment plans provided by general practitioners. This allows dentists to provide better care to their patients.

The American Dental Association recognizes nine specialties: dental public health, endodontics, oral and maxillofacial pathology, oral and maxillofacial radiology, oral and maxillofacial surgery, orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics, pediatric dentistry, periodontics, and prosthodontics. Further, three disciplines—oral medicine, orofacial pain, and anesthesiology are accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation.

Although their structures are not identical, similar disciplines are recognized as specialties in different countries around the world. These similar disciplines emerged as specialties, pretty much simultaneously. This shows that the developments in dentistry created the need for more trained dentists who will provide complicated specific procedures. With a cohesive understanding of the patients' needs, as well as a single treatment goal, general practitioners and specialists will provide the necessary environment for successful comprehensive dental care.

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