

## Education for lifelong learning and referrals in practice



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The dental profession, similar to all medical fields, is moving forward to specialty and sub-specialty orientation. The increase in knowledge, ongoing innovations, and rapidly progressing research efforts make it crucial to stay well updated in each and every aspect of dental practice. When we are educating and teaching the next generation of dental practitioners, this should be one of our guiding principles in planning the clinical and didactic portions of the curriculum.

One aspect should be a lifelong learning ability, which we have a duty to incorporate in our educational process. We have to make sure that our graduates are capable of continuing effective learning over time, as well as having solid skills to critically evaluate new information, as this will lead to responsible decision making. A dentist lacking these important skills will stay behind and very soon will be outdated, especially in our current highly innovative era.

The second aspect should be the referral practice skills we provide to our students and graduates. As in any other medical field, there are certain cases that one might feel need to be treated by a specialist in a specific field. Our educational system should encourage wide collaboration with various specialists in the practice environment. Referring a patient to a

specialist should be part of the care that is provided throughout the student life as well as the graduate life of the dental professional. It doesn't mean that the referring dentist is not capable; on the contrary, it means that the referring dentist is responsible enough to cooperate with different specialists in various fields. This type of practice enriches the conversation, promotes further educational and knowledgeable discussion, and improves patient care over time.

Referral practice is a learned skill. It should be incorporated by dental schools, and actively encouraged and demonstrated in the curriculum. A student educated in a non-referral environment will find it difficult to incorporate this skill in their future professional life as a practicing dentist. Presenting to a student the enriching and empowering ways to develop good referral-oriented practice will help them implement this skill in the future. Encouraging active discussions between students, residents, and specialists at different levels will improve and enhance the level of the discussion, will enrich understanding, and will benefit patient care.

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