



CNA HealthPro

Effective Physician Consultations

Consultations with physicians and other health care professionals are an important part of treating and protecting the health of patients with special medical conditions. Dentists have both an ethical and legal duty to be knowledgeable about the non-dental consequences of the treatment they perform as well as the medications they prescribe, as ignorance is not a valid defense to a malpractice action. Effective management of these cases depends on gathering the necessary information prior to treatment.

Consultations are an opportunity to better serve the patient. Whenever possible, send a specific consultation letter tailored to the needs of the patient. Indicate the pertinent findings in the patient's medical history and describe the dental procedure you intend to perform. Be certain to include the presenting conditions of the patient, the length of treatment time, the expected amount of bleeding and other pertinent information. Use lay terms and don't assume that all health care providers have a working knowledge of dentistry, or that they understand the difference between a surgical and non-surgical dental procedure.

Briefly detail your reasons for concern, such as the potential for excessive bleeding, site infection, or SBE. Indicate the medications you intend to give the patient (including anesthetics), how they will be administered, and in what dosage. This will aid the consultant in determining an appropriate protocol for patient management, including pharmacologic needs, if any.

It is advisable to request and obtain reports in writing and in advance of the treatment date. Keep all written consultation reports in the patient's chart. A written report will document that you have taken the necessary course of action to protect your patient from potential harm.

If you must make a consultation request by phone, spend enough time to adequately address all of your patient care concerns. Make a comprehensive notation in the dental record, including the name and telephone number of the person to whom you spoke, the consultant's professional title, as well as all pertinent information and recommendations gathered during the conversation. Follow up by sending a confirmatory written summary of the conversation to the consultant.

If, after receiving a consultant's report, you feel uncomfortable with the information, contact the consultant. This will enable you to determine if you're correctly interpreting what has been written, and if necessary, to ask for sources that support the information. If you remain unsatisfied, ask another consultant for an additional opinion. It is neither in the best interest of the patient, or yours, to proceed with care unless you are satisfied that the information you received from the consultant makes sense for this patient. Moreover, it will not constitute a defense in a malpractice suit that another health care practitioner told you to do something if you knew or should have known that the recommendations contained in the consultation were incorrect or unsubstantiated.

Consultations with physicians and other health care providers can protect patients from avoidable errors and dentists from avoidable liability. They're a worthwhile investment of time and effort.

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