



## CNA HealthPro

### FAQs – Referral Refusal

**Q.** I am a general dentist in a rural area. There is no specialist of any kind within 30 miles of my office. Because of the travel distance, it is not unusual for my patients to balk when I suggest a referral to a specialist. Trying to keep patients happy, I have gone ahead and treated cases of all kinds that I originally thought best to refer, including third molar extractions, molar endo and perio surgery. Fortunately, I haven't encountered any major problems so far. But how much risk am I accepting by attempting the treatment after the referral is refused?

**A.** The risks in this situation are twofold. The first is the risk inherent in performing the clinical procedure itself – that is, the risk of a patient injury during your treatment, such as paresthesia following a third molar extraction. A specialist would face the same risk, but would generally have greater skills that reduce the likelihood of an injury.

The second risk involves the reversal of your position regarding the need for referral. You used your professional judgment in initially determining that it was in the patient's best interest to be treated by a specialist – hence your original recommendation of referral. By capitulating at the insistence of the patient, you compromise your own judgment and place yourself in the midst of a clinical situation you already deemed best to avoid.

If it is truly in the patient's best interest to be treated by a specialist, you potentially compromise the quality of care delivered to the patient by assenting to his or her wishes. It is never a good idea to attempt treatment that exceeds your own level of comfort and skill. Insist upon the referral and explain the benefits to the patient.

Should you elect to proceed at the patient's request, you not only assume the risk of treatment you considered prudent to avoid, you also will ordinarily be held to the standard of care of the specialist to whom you intended to refer. If you are not capable of treating to this standard, it would be judicious not to begin treatment. Remember that the patient cannot waive your duty to practice at or above the standard of care.

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