

REFER YOUR PATIENT TO A FRIEND - ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THAT?



Many times, throughout our careers, we are asked to refer a friend or colleague to another professional for specialized services.

I am most frequently asked about lawyers, accountants, and bankers who focus on serving health care professionals. Naturally, I only refer to those whom I know and trust.

I also take considerable pride in character matching the client with the referred professional.

You do the exact same – daily.

Here is a unique outbound referral situation

While speaking with a client recently about the volume of outbound specialty referrals from his general practice, he mentioned that he only sends his patients to his most trusted colleagues.

That is completely natural, entirely understandable, and something I fully respect.

He also revealed that new specialists in his community frequently approach him but that he remains faithful to his long term, trusted specialists.

So, who do you trust?

He shared a recent situation involving a long-term patient who was leaving the area. The patient asked him to recommend a trustworthy practitioner in another province.

The dentist immediately searched for professionals in that community to see if he knew anyone.

He recognized a name from many years back and reached out to confirm that the individual was still actively practicing.

Everything checked out, and the dentist assured him that the patient would be well looked after.

During the conversation, however, it was mentioned that the practice had recently been sold to one of the larger organizations.

This is when things shifted.

After the call, he felt a subtle but unmistakable sense of unease.



A reservation.
The kind that lingers.
What was the concern?
It is important to understand that he has gathered opinions from colleagues who have joined large groups.
Most of them are not happy.
Based on these conversations with trusted and credible peers, he has formed a strong opinion.
He is deliberately anti-corporate.
That is his prerogative.
So now, what should he do with the referral? He did not know anyone else in that city, which was many kilometers away.
Should he send his long-term patient into a new city and leave them to search online?
No way!
Not if he can make a referral with confidence.
He pondered several questions:

1. Will my patient truly be best served by this individual?
2. How much longer will the receiving dentist continue to practice, knowing that many who sell remain for less than 5 years – often much less.
3. Will the new ownership structure impact clinical judgment or other ethical boundaries?

He shared this story with me because he was facing a genuine professional dilemma.
We spent considerable time discussing it.
He was deeply reluctant to make the referral.
After reflecting on it for a few days, he decided to proceed and referred his patient to the newly anointed corporate-owned dental office.
It's too early for feedback, but he intends to follow up.
What stood out for me was the depth of his hesitation. It reflected a broader concern that some of these larger organizations may not always place patient interest first.
He also expressed the view that his trusted friends stated that they are not well served within these structures.
Most report that the financial objectives of the scheme are the priority.
These organizations often state that their primary responsibility is to serve shareholders.
Patients are not shareholders.
In many cases, the dentists working within these organizations are not shareholders.
It is something worth considering the next time a patient you care about is relocating and asks for your recommendation.
Sometimes, we need to pause and think carefully about whether we are comfortable making that recommendation based on everything we know about the individual, the business structure that supervises them.
Yes, dentists are supervised in the large groups.
Independence is lacking or lost.
So, ask yourself this: Would ownership structure influence your decision to refer?
It is something worth thinking about.
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