

I JUST WANT A TOOTH PULLED!!

Dear Dr. McCrummen: I called several dental offices because I wanted a tooth taken out that had been hurting me for weeks. All said they needed to see me for an examination and x-rays first, and they may need to send me to an oral surgeon. Why can't I just get my tooth pulled? And, why can't I just go directly to the oral surgeon if I am going to get sent there anyway? R.P.

A General Dentist must take time to verify what the problem is, to justify tooth removal or referral to a specialist. It is common that the tooth a person thinks is bad, is not actually the bad tooth, or there is simpler treatment to control the discomfort. Testing must be done. The dentist needs to know how much tooth structure is left, how unusual the root shape may be, if removal may affect a sinus or major nerve, if complex surgery may be needed to remove crooked or cracked roots, or if an abscess may need to be treated first.

It is also important to know the patients anxiety level, their present and past health problems, the medications they may be taking that could create a reaction or lead to a complication, and their current blood pressure. Some medications, illegal drugs, and herbs can lead to serious treatment complications.

The patient should also be informed of options, risks and benefits, and the estimated costs. A decision will need to be made if it is best to be sedated for the procedure, if an oral surgeon would be the best one to remove the tooth, if other teeth should come out at the same visit, and if their physician should be consulted. Also, since the dentist may have pre-scheduled patients appointed several weeks out, a decision must be made regarding the time needed for the procedure and when it can be reasonably scheduled.

If a General Dentist refers someone to a specialist it is in the patients best interest (referring treatment to a specialist reduces the general dentists potential income, and they are not compensated in any way for a referral). The patient benefits from the referral. Often, they can be treated faster by a specialist once the diagnosis is made and consent has been obtained.

A specialist typically provides the treatment prescribed by a general dentist. They evaluate the request, the x-ray, and see if they agree with the proposed treatment. If they do, and the patient agrees with the treatment and accepts the risks, the procedure is done.

In my experience, it is not unusual for some people to only be seen for repeated emergency treatment. When they are seen, there can be several teeth in various stages of degeneration due to long-term neglect. Other diseased teeth may need to be removed that just don't hurt yet. With a complete examination, blood pressure screening, oral cancer evaluation, and gum disease check, other diseases can be detected that the person may not be aware of. A thorough examination and timely treatment can greatly reduce the risk of being in pain again, missing work, losing sleep, and being sent to the surgeon to remove one-tooth-at-a-time at greater cost and inconvenience.

Most dental disease can be prevented. If problems are detected in the early stages they can often be treated simply, painlessly, and save a lot of money. Sounds good to me, and to my regularly seen patients!