

Wrong Tooth Injury

A 22-year-old patient came in for a new patient examination and x-rays. Part of the treatment included the extraction of tooth #14 due to extensive caries. The patient was informed and given a referral slip to the OMS specialist.

When the patient was going to call the OMS office for an appointment, he discovered he had lost the referral slip. He called the dental office and was sent another referral slip.

He made the appointment for the extraction and gave the referral slip to the OMS receptionist. The oral surgeon reviewed the slip and promptly extracted tooth #4. The problem was it was not the correct tooth to extract and was not discovered until the patient returned to the general dentist several weeks later.

The part time receptionist at the general dentist office had entered tooth #4 instead of #14.

Similar versions of this scenario occur frequently in many dental offices and are a major driver for many claims.

Many times, patients, referral slips, and signed treatment plans are accepted methods to refer a patient to a specialist, but there are exceptions.

There were many reasons why this injury occurred.

- Staff should have double checked the referral slip and had the referring doctor to sign off on it.
- The referring doctor should have confirmed the treatment with the specialist with a phone call.
- The specialist should have confirmed the treatment before the extraction.
- The patient should have been better educated regarding the extraction.

By having a standard office policy in place regarding referrals, the prudent doctor can avoid this incident and the inevitable claim that follows. In most cases, the settlement for correction of the injury usually demands much more money and time than the original treatment plan.

All staff and providers should be guided by a standard office policy and manual that mandates specific protocols to be followed when referring any patient to a specialist. This will mitigate risk and liability and help prevent a wrong tooth injury.

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