



The College of Naturopaths of Ontario



# Guidelines

## Referrals and Consultations

### Introduction

Access to care is a growing challenge for many patients. The College of Naturopaths of Ontario (CONO) recognizes that every possible measure must be taken to ensure access to timely and effective health care services. Appropriate referral and consultation information, as well as good communication between referring and consulting health care professionals, are essential components of safe patient care. This guide is not intended to replace processes that are already in place. It is an additional resource that may help to fill the gaps, where there are currently few tools to support effective referrals and consultations.

### Definitions

**Referral:** a request from one health professional to another to assume responsibility for management of one or more of a patient's health problems. This may be for a specified period of time, until the problem is resolved or on an ongoing basis. It represents a temporary or partial transfer of care to another health professional for a particular condition. It is the responsibility of the health professional accepting the referral (the consultant) to maintain appropriate and timely communication with the referring health professional. Members are aware that certain situations trigger a mandatory duty to refer as set out in s. 13 of the General Regulation.

**Consultation:** a request from one health professional to another for an advisory opinion. The consultant performs the requested service and makes written recommendations regarding diagnosis and/or treatment to the requesting health professional. The requesting health professional may incorporate the consultant's opinion, as well as any other factors (e.g., patient preferences, other consultations, comorbidities) when providing treatment to the patient. A consultant's opinion should not replace the primary health professional's judgment.

**Critical Value:** A laboratory test result that is communicated by the medical laboratory to the naturopathic doctor indicating a marked deviation from reference ranges, with no clear indication to the laboratory from the naturopathic doctor that these are expected deviations. Results of this nature may indicate a significant risk of a life-threatening event.

A list of tests and critical values can be found in the Ontario Association of Medical Laboratories' Guideline for Reporting Laboratory Test Results.

### Mandatory Referrals

Section 13 of the General Regulation under the Naturopathy Act, 2007 includes a series of mandatory referral indicators. That means when certain conditions exist, a naturopath must refer a patient to a physician, nurse practitioner extended class or a member of another appropriate regulated health profession. The conditions include situations where:

- A patient's life is or may be at risk (in such cases, a naturopath must call emergency services and transfer the patient to a hospital).
- A patient's condition prevents the naturopath from communicating a diagnosis because the condition is beyond the scope of practice of the profession.
- Treatment of a patient's condition is beyond the scope of practice of the profession.
- Treatment of a patient's condition requires diagnostic, monitoring or treatment related technology that is beyond the scope of practice of the profession.
- The patient or their authorized representative asks the naturopath to refer the patient to another naturopath, or to a member of another health profession.
- A laboratory test result is a critical value test result, which means it shows a marked deviation from the reference ranges, with no clear indication to the laboratory that these are expected deviations.
- The patient's response to treatment is not adequate and unlikely to improve based on alternative treatments available from the naturopath, or the patient's condition significantly deteriorates and is likely to continue to do so without a referral.

A naturopath who is required to refer a patient is not prohibited from providing supportive or other health services, within the scope of practice of the profession, provided they collaborate with:

- The person to whom the patient was referred.
- The patient.

## Referrals (mandatory and non-mandatory) and Consultations

These elements can be applied to any referral, whether mandatory or non-mandatory, and consultation between health professionals. They can also be applied in clinical practice and in the context of service agreements between care providers or facilities.

When a naturopath believes (or where required by law) that a consultation or referral is appropriate, it is recommended that the referring naturopath provide, at a minimum, a written request which includes:

- The specific reason(s) for the consultation/referral;
- Accurate patient contact information (address and phone number);
- Basic demographic information about the patient (gender and age);
- The requesting naturopath's contact information (address, phone number);
- Urgency of the consultation/referral;
- Relevant medical history;
- Current medications and natural health products;
- All relevant test and procedure results.

A copy of the referral/consultation request should be maintained in the patient record.

It is important to note that prior to requesting a consultation or referral, a naturopath must discuss the purpose of the consultation or referral with the patient. The naturopath should ensure that the patient agrees with the release of information, and the choice of health professional to whom a request is being made.

Where a patient does not consent to a referral/consultation or communication, the naturopath must document the discussion, difference of opinion and implications for care in the patient's record. The naturopath should continue to provide care as best as possible within any limits imposed by the patient's decision.

## Accepting a Referral Request

A naturopath is not required to accept a referral request. However, if a request for a referral is denied, the naturopath needs to provide the referring health professional with the reasons for denying the referral and, whenever possible, suggestions for alternative health professionals or services that may be available.

When a naturopath receives a request for a referral, it is recommended that the naturopath, at a minimum:

- Provide a prompt written response to the referring health professional within fourteen (14) days;
- Schedule the appointment directly with the patient and send a copy of the appointment information to the referring health professional, unless otherwise agreed;
- Advise the patient of any specific requirements prior to the appointment;
- Communicate expectations about office procedures and policies to the patient (e.g. fees, cancellation policies, etc.).

Where relevant and applicable, it is recommended that a naturopath, within 30 days of completion of the initial assessment (which may take more than one visit), provide the referring health professional with a written report that may include:

- An opening statement outlining the reasons for the referral/consultation;
- An appropriate history related to the problem, including documentation of the relevant positive and negative findings to assist in making a differential diagnosis;
- Any risk factors related to the disease/disorder under consideration;
- A review of systems;
- Family and social histories;
- A review of medications and allergies;
- A complete physical examination of the system of interest;
- A review of available laboratory results, reports of relevant investigations, and any other pertinent patient data;
- A summary of conclusions and recommendations including;
  - The investigations to be done;
  - The potential risks and benefits of each investigation (if applicable);
  - The treatment prescribed or administered, including any changes to existing medications or new medications prescribed, and a list of side effects that were discussed with the patient;
  - The professional advice provided to the patient; and
  - Particulars of any referrals made by the naturopath.
- The follow up plan (e.g., whether the referring health professional or naturopath will follow-up and when the patient is to return for follow up).

It is recommended that subsequent follow-up reports be sent to the referring health professional, within 30 days, when there are new findings or changes are made to the management plan. Follow up reports should include the following:

- A detailed review of the initial problem consulted on and any response to therapy;
- A detailed physical examination related to the system/problem;
- A review of any laboratory reports, consultation reports, reports of investigations performed, and any other pertinent patient data received since the previous visit related to the system/problem; and
- A summary of conclusions, recommendations, and follow up plan.

Copies of Referral/Consultation reports should be maintained in the patient record.

A naturopath who has accepted a referral must obtain informed consent from the patient directly and not defer the consent process to the referring health professional.

It is recommended that a naturopath who has accepted a referral inform the referring health professional when and if the patient has been returned to the original referrer.

## Prompt Sheets

These prompt sheets can be used by NDs to support appropriate referrals and consultations.

### Referral Prompt Sheet

These are items that you may consider including in a referral request letter, where they are relevant and applicable.

The beginning of the letter/form/email may include the following:

1. Patient's name, address, date of birth, and contact information;
2. Referring naturopath's name and contact information;
3. Health professionals name, address and contact information;
4. Urgency of referral – urgent, semi-urgent, routine or elective.

Other important information that may be relevant:

- Reason for referral;
- Naturopathic diagnosis – confirmed or differential;
- Succinct history of problem related to reason(s) for referral and/or other problems;
- Relevant information on patient's medical status –relevant past history or notes;
- Current and recent medications and/or natural health products;
- Clinical warnings/significant findings on examination;
- Copies of test results;
- What has been communicated to the patient;
- Any possible mitigating factors against particular treatments or arrangements;
- Special considerations (e.g. psychiatric/social problems, need for an interpreter, any other concerns of patient's family);
- Follow-up/role of referring naturopath – who will resume care after the referral.

Finish with a note of thanks for their help in managing the patient.

### Consultation Prompt Sheet

These are items that you may consider including in a consultation request letter. The beginning of the letter/form/email may include the following:

1. Patient's name, address, and date of birth and contact information;
2. Requesting naturopath's name and contact information;
3. Consulting health professionals name, address and contact information.

Other important information that may be relevant:

- Reason for Consultation;
- Chief complaint/relevant history;
- Additions to problem list and/or summary of current status of medical conditions;
- Findings – clinical findings on examination, including test results;
- Investigations/interventions;
- Naturopathic diagnosis – confirmed or differential;
- Treatments and management plan:
  - Goal of treatment;
  - Options considered and supported/not supported;
  - Recommended treatment and management;
  - Proposed treatment schedule with reasons;
  - Anticipated benefits and risks of treatment;
  - Changed or newly prescribed medication(s) and/or natural health products;

- Likely short and long-term complications;
  - Possible effects of treatment on patient's quality of life and functional capacity;
  - Contingency plans in case of adverse events from (or failure of) first choice treatment.
- Prognosis;
- Psychosocial aspects (e.g., patient's understanding, psychiatric/social problems);
- Follow up arrangements (who and when to review the patient following consultations, including any situations which may prompt an earlier or additional review).

Finish with a note of thanks for their help managing the patient.

## References

College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario. Policy Statement #4-12, Medical Records. Updated May 2012.

College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta. The Referral Consultation Process, Standard 6. January 2012

College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia. Guidelines for Physicians Regarding Referral and Consultation. March 2010

Royal College of Family Physicians of Canada. Guide to Enhancing Referrals and Consultations Between Physicians. October 2009.

Ontario Association of Medical Laboratories. [Guideline for Reporting Laboratory Test Results](#)

## Legislative Framework

[Professional Misconduct Regulation](#)

[General Regulation](#)

## Relevant Standards & Guidelines

[Consent](#)

[Record Keeping](#)