



# Integrative Practitioner

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## Why integrative professionals need to forge solid referral relationships

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Integrative healthcare professionals rely on conventional medical providers, and each other, to get patients and clients through the front door. Developing strong referral relationships is a key to success, according to Elie Cole, DAOM, LAc, of The Nourishing Medicine Clinic in Portland, Oregon, who said integrative care providers must build bridges with conventional practitioners.

“Chinese medicine is at a crossroads in the West,” she said. “We can keep going down the road of isolated individuals practicing an esoteric and magical type of ancient practice or we can ...collaborate with biomedical professionals so that more patients can benefit from the healing effects of our medicine.”

A [review article](#) published in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* cites several studies that point to how important it is for integrative healthcare professionals to build and sustain referral relationships with traditional providers. Jessica Weizenbluth, an attorney at Weizenbluth Law and president of The Integrative Lawyer said as providers seek to help their patients reach various holistic goals, the benefits of developing referral relationships between licensed practitioners and unlicensed allied integrative practitioners, such as health coaches, have become strikingly apparent.

For example, Weizenbluth said a licensed healthcare professional such as a physician or dietician might diagnose a patient with a medical problem that can be resolved with simple lifestyle changes,

“These professionals do not usually have the time to ensure their patients are actually implementing changes to aspects [of their lives] like diet, weight, stress and other factors that directly affect health but are not really categorized as medical,” said Weizenbluth. “Referring a patient to an integrative health coach provides the patient with someone who can teach them how to implement important lifestyle changes in a sustainable, paced manner.”

This type of referral relationship enhances patient care, leads to better patient outcomes and ensures each professional can thrive within the scope of their practice, she said.

To create strong referral relationships with both conventional providers, as well as other integrative professionals, however, it is important to adopt a variety of best practices, according to Cole.

## Cast a wide net

“I believe we should share the amazing medicine we have the good fortune to practice with as many other medical providers as possible,” Cole said. “I don’t only have [medical doctors] referring to me, I also have nurse practitioners, physician assistants, physical therapists, counselors, dietitians, and chiropractors.”

## Educate other providers

“It’s important for biomedical providers to understand acupuncture’s research-based mechanisms of actions so that they confidently refer patients to local acupuncture clinics,” Cole said. “Biomedical providers know that acupuncture works but they don’t often know who to send their patients to:”

## Communicate frequently

Integrative professionals should communicate with other providers often and seek “to explain intelligently and in scientific language how your complementary medicine works,” Cole said.

## Respect one another

Practitioners must maintain genuine respect for the other professionals' style of medicine. Cole specifically emphasized that integrative practitioners and their relationship with conventional providers. They should strive to overcome any negative bias against conventional medicine, Cole said.

## Proactively market your services

Cole said she frequently conducts lunch-and-learn sessions where she explains the benefits and science of her services to conventional providers.

## Build trust

According to [a survey published](#) in *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, trust between integrative care providers and conventional providers is paramount. According to the study, integrative professionals perceived trust as being an important feature of the professional relationship when referring to other integrative professionals as well.

## Stay in your lane

To build strong relationships, integrative practitioners must also stick to what they know. They should remain aware of their limitations as a practitioner and feel comfortable saying when something is out of their scope of practice.

## Be aware of the legal restrictions

There are both federal and state laws that prohibit and restrict certain referral relationships, and care providers need to make sure they comply with these regulations, Weizenbluth said.

“Referrals between practitioners can be highly rewarding and can greatly improve patient care, but it is imperative practitioners ensure these arrangements comply with relevant state and federal laws and regulations to ensure they do not risk losing their license, large monetary fines, exclusion from participation in federal healthcare programs or imprisonment,” said Weizenbluth. “Practitioners should always consult specialized healthcare attorneys before embarking on any referral relationships.”

## About the Author:

*John McCormack is a Riverside, Illinois-based freelance writer who routinely covers healthcare information technology, policy, and clinical care issues. While he often writes about complex topics, he always looks to find the human stories that everyone – from healthcare executives to providers to*

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