

# A Survey for Endodontists in Today's Economy: Exploring the Current State of Endodontics as a Profession and the Relationship between Endodontists and Their Referral Base

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions, referral trends, and practice patterns of practicing endodontists in the United States and any effect the recent economy may have had on these. **Methods:** A 24-question survey was formulated and sent via [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) to 3255 active members of the American Association of Endodontists. Overall, 875 participants completed the survey, a response rate of 26.9%. **Results:** The average number of treatment cases per day was 5.7. Average work hours per week were 34.3 for men and 30.7 for women ( $P < .05$ ). Among all treatment cases, 46% were nonsurgical retreatment, and 7.2% were apical surgical procedures. Procedural misadventure accounted for 10.8% of all treatment cases, with the most common referral reason being unable to locate canals (75.0%) followed by separated instruments (15.3%). Of all respondents, 49.9% performed regenerative endodontic procedures, and 7.7% placed implants. Among endodontists who practice in urban areas, 69.7% believed there were too many endodontists, and 50% have delayed their retirement plans because of recent economic impact, compared with their suburban and rural counterparts at 66.1% and 38%, 25.9% and 33.1%, respectively ( $P < .05$ ). Fifty-nine percent of respondents were optimistic about the future of endodontics as a specialty, but those who have practiced more than 20 years were more pessimistic than those with less experience ( $P < .05$ ). **Conclusions:** Recent economic impacts appear to have had an effect on the perceptions of active endodontists regarding practice success, the future of the specialty, and their retirement plans. Those who have been in practice longest (>20 years), practice in urban settings, and practice in a solo environment are most significantly affected. (*J Endod* 2015;41:325–332)

## Key Words

Economy, endodontic therapy, endodontics, recession, referral, root canal, surveys

Through immense efforts of our predecessors, endodontics was officially recognized as a dental specialty in 1963 by the American Dental Association (1). It is an ever evolving specialty (1–4), as seen from the invention of engine-driven rotary instrumentation, single-file systems such as WaveOne and Reciproc, regenerative endodontics, and the decision-making process of implant versus endodontics (5). The advancement of how one practices endodontics for general practitioners (GPs) and endodontists is shifting continuously.

There are many factors that can place pressure on the profession of endodontics. Although endodontists in the United States have been surveyed on irrigation regimens (6), types of intraosseous anesthesia (7), nickel-titanium rotary instrumentation (8), magnification (9), one-appointment endodontics (10), and overall armamentarium (11), there has not yet been a survey regarding perceptions and referral patterns of practicing endodontists today. Factors such as the progression of technology that allows GPs to perform more root canal therapy (12), the recent explosion in popularity of implants as a lucrative procedure across multiple specialties and GPs alike, the recent downturn of the U.S. economy (13), and an increase in both educational loans and interest rates for dental education (14) may affect endodontists' practices. Moreover, a study conducted by Johns et al (15) concluded that in the future, endodontists will have fewer endodontic-related diseases to treat because the majority of Generation X has substantially fewer total caries than their baby-boomers counterparts. A recent survey reported that recent GP graduates ( $\leq 10$  years) were more likely to adopt new technologies than those who practiced for >20 years, and more experienced GPs were more likely to take on more complicated cases than those with fewer years of practice (12). Individually, each of these factors could potentially affect the referral relationship and the perception of a practicing endodontist. Combined, these factors could play a significant role in changing the dynamics of the referral relationship between endodontists and GPs. Gaining insights on these trends is informative and may relate to the success of all practicing endodontists and the specialty as a whole.

In the recent past, there have been surveys conducted from the GP's perspective analyzing the referral relationship, which have shown concrete actions endodontists could potentially take to increase their referral base and improve their referral relationship (16, 17). However, to the authors' knowledge no study has examined U.S. endodontists' perceptions regarding the referral relationship and endodontic

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economics. Thus, the purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions, referral trends, and practice patterns of practicing endodontists in the United States and any effect the recent economy may have had on these.

## Methods

This study was reviewed and declared exempt by the Institutional Review Board of Oregon Health and Science University. A pilot survey was sent to a group of local endodontists whose feedback was incorporated into the final 24-question survey (Fig. 1). An invitation to participate in the online survey administered through [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com) was e-mailed to all 3255 U.S. endodontists listed as “active” in the online membership directory of the American Association of Endodontists (AAE). The survey was divided into 3 categories in the following order: baseline demographics, clinical trends, and perspective opinions. Each question was individually formatted to allow a single response or multiple responses, depending on the nature of the question. To encourage respondents to answer all questions, an error message was delivered once if 1 or more questions were left unanswered. However, respondents were free to choose not to answer questions. Participants were informed that the survey was a resident research project and that anonymity of the participants was assured. A reminder e-mail was sent 2 weeks after the initial e-mail.

## Statistical Analysis

Chi-squared test and one-way analysis of variance were used to assess the associations between selected demographic factors, namely gender, years in practice, area of practice (urban, suburban, rural), practice setting (solo, partner, associate, contractor), patterns of referral, opinions about the future of the profession, and retirement plans. Logistic regression analysis was used to assess independent factors associated with having a pessimistic attitude toward the practice of endodontics and postponement of retirement plans. The regression models were adjusted for area of practice, years in practice, and practice setting.

## Results

Eight hundred seventy-five endodontists responded to the survey, representing a 26.9% response rate. Eighty percent of participants were male. Demographic data, experience, and type of practice are reported in Table 1.

On average, respondents reported working 33.6 hours per week, with men averaging 34.3 hours (standard deviation, 7.6) and women averaging 30.7 hours (standard deviation, 8.6). The difference between genders was statistically significant ( $P < .05$ ). The mean number of treatment cases per day was 5.7 (range, 1–20) (Table 2). Of all participants, 56.3% were not as busy as they would like to be, 40.6% were as

Baseline Demographics	
1. What is your gender? - Male - Female	6. On average, how many hours do you practice in a week? - Select 0-60
2. How many years have you been practicing as an endodontist? - > 20 years - Between 11 – 20 years - Between 5 – 10 years - < 5 years	7. On average, how many treatment cases do you see per day? - Select 1-20
3. In what ADA region of the country do you practice? - Northeast - Mid Atlantic - Southeast - Great Lakes - Mid West - Western	8. How busy is your current schedule? - As busy as I would like it to be - Not as busy as I would like it to be - Too busy
4. What practice setting best describes your working situation? - Solo endodontic practice owner - Group endodontic practice partner - Associate at multiple endodontic offices - Associate at one endodontic office - Contractor at multiple GP offices - Large group practice with multiple GPs and specialists - Military affiliated - Academia - Other	9. What type of marketing is being done? - Providing gifts - Personally visiting GP offices in the area - Gifts (e.g. lunch boxes, candies, tickets to sporting events, concerts and movies) - Social activities (e.g. golf, tennis, theater, lunches with your referring GPs) - Website - Mobile app - Facebook page - Yellow Pages - Study club - Other
5. What best describes the area in which you practice? - Urban - Suburban - Rural	

**Figure 1.** Survey questionnaire.

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