

A Geriatric Patient with Oral Health Issues Moves Through the Health System



Lena Walton
86-year-old woman who lives with her daughter and primary caregiver, Pamela

Medical History:
moderate to severe dementia
type 2 diabetes
hypertension
hyperlipidemia

Lena is admitted to the hospital for altered mental status, acute kidney injury, and hypernatremia. Hospitalist, Dr. Lund, notes that Lena has dry mucus membranes, minimal responsiveness, and poor dentition. Pamela updates Dr. Lund on the broken tooth and shares that Lena hasn't visited a dentist in almost 10 years.

Upon an oral exam, Dr. Lund notices a decayed root tip, several teeth missing, and several badly decayed posterior teeth in both the mandible and maxilla.

A consult to the oral medicine department is placed.

Pamela is referred to a geriatrician to provide comprehensive geriatric care and home health aide assistance each week to support Pamela and her sisters.

With her pain resolved, Lena returns to her previous enjoyment of eating and drinking, and her daughters are grateful to spend time with their mother.



Lena breaks a front tooth while eating. Due to her limited mobility, making outpatient medical visits is difficult and Lena does not have a dental home.



Over the next 2 weeks, Lena requires more support to ambulate, has difficulty taking fluids, and becomes minimally responsive. Pamela calls her primary care physician who recommends the emergency room for an evaluation.



The oral medicine specialist, Dr. Bergstrom, conducts an oral exam and collects periapical radiographs.

He recommends that 3 non-restorable teeth be extracted. Dr. Lund agrees there are no medical contraindications and gets consent from Pamela, Lena's health care proxy.

During Lena's discharge, referrals are arranged to follow-up with oral medicine. The inpatient nurse case manager arranges transportation to the dental appointment.



During the dental appointment, Dr. Bergstrom conducts a thorough exam and her dental hygienist scales and polishes Lena's remaining teeth.

Lena is doing well at home and the extraction sockets have healed well.

Dr. Bergstrom and Pamela participate in shared decision making and ultimately decide that Lena would likely not cope well with having new dentures.