I have a patient in my office who refuses to have periodontal probing done. I have made thorough notes, but do I also need him to sign an informed refusal form? Does anyone have a form for refusal of periodontal probing?

Many would say it is time to dismiss this patient. They won’t let you look under the hood, so you can’t fix the car. Without probings, you have no clue where to start, what to prescribe, etc. I agree with dismissing him, but I know clinicians who will just document and continue to treat them. I wish my wife (the dentist) would dismiss patients who do this kind of thing – mostly X-ray refusals. I can’t recall anyone refusing probing.

Start at the beginning. Have the patient share with you why he refuses to have an evaluation to diagnose perio or gingivitis. His concerns/fears should be addressed. Maybe it was painful once, maybe he is very sensitive, maybe he doesn’t want to hear the truth, maybe he thinks it costs more, maybe he has a fatal illness he hasn’t disclosed? By understanding his challenge, it will enable you to comfort or assure the patient of the importance of the procedure.

The only time I have surrendered to that request was from a patient who had terminal cancer and only three to six months life expectancy. She still valued having her teeth cleaned but felt that the perio probing would be unnecessary and preferred to avoid any unpleasant sensations. Based on her previous history and current medical condition I was more than happy to provide her palliative treatment until the end of her life, which was taken too soon at her young age.

As a former educator in radiography, one of the things you tell students is that refusal of radiographs is asking the dentist or hygienist to treat you without all the necessary information. Radiographs and periodontal probe depths are considered standard of care procedures and as thus cannot be done without. Legally, a patient cannot consent to negligent care and it would not stand up in court – this is what an “informed refusal” form is. A lawyer would laugh at that should he come back at some point and try to sue because you missed a diagnosis due to not using “standard of care” diagnostic tools. Since he is asking you to perform your job without all the necessary information and asking you to be negligent in your practice, I would kindly dismiss him. Why would or should we practice negligence? Can you imagine a physician treating a patient for diabetes without lab work? Or doing surgery without radiographs? No... they would not treat the patient and neither should we. Until a patient realizes he can’t dictate treatment, he will continue to ask us to compromise, and I see it done in dentistry all the time when it should not be. Stand up for your rights. Tell them that your conscience does not allow you to be negligent in his treatment.
I guess it depends why they decline probing. I have been told by some that it hurts more than the scaling. Has the patient given a reason? I remember hearing that during sales training, students are told to find out why someone objects to something, and once you know, you can overcome those objections.

I have never really asked a patient if I could do perio probing. I do it as a standard part of my exam. On regular patients I use a plastic ivory-colored PSR probe, probing with the traditional probe if the PSR probe goes into the red line. Green for go and red for stop. There are ballpoint probes available that might be less painful.

Maybe the probing is painful. I empathize with patients telling them that I know it sometimes feels like needles and this is one of the worst procedures we do. Then I continue to tell them why it is necessary as I am probing. You might try some topical anesthesia. Maybe have them hold a hand mirror to watch?