

Patient Abandonment: Terminating the Patient-Physician Relationship

Healthcare providers have an obligation to provide continuity of care for existing patients. Physicians who abandon patients can face lawsuits and may subject their medical license to discipline.

Before a physician can withdraw from a physician-patient relationship they must provide notice of the termination of their relationship to the patient. Notice must be provided long enough in advance to allow a patient the opportunity to obtain another medical provider. What constitutes a reasonable amount of notice depends on the circumstances presented and the patient's health care needs.

It is typically advisable to document the reasons for dismissal as well as attempts made to rectify the relationship in a letter to the patient providing brief, objective and non-discriminatory reason for the dismissal, along with a specific date after which the practice will be unable to provide further care. Consider sending the letter via certified mail and placing a copy of the return receipt in the chart. It may also be appropriate to include a referral to another healthcare provider, group or the local medical society so that the patient is aware of other alternatives for treatment.

Keep in mind that your organization may already have a policy outlining the preferred methods to terminate the patient-physician relationship.

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