

## Ending the Practitioner-Patient Relationship

Sometimes you should end it, sometimes you must end it and sometimes it's just a temporary break. There are different situations which result in terminating your relationship with a patient.

1. They die, or you do.
2. The patient chooses to end it.
3. The treatment plan has been completed.
4. The practitioner chooses to withdraw services..

This first one is easy. It's over.

The second one raises the question of why they don't want to come back. True professionals try to find out the answer to this and document the reasons on the file.

Numbers three and four involve formally discharging a patient from care.

Withdrawal of care requires that you inform the patient. You may do this orally when appropriate but you must also put it in writing.  
(If you anticipate any contentious issues, make sure to send the notice of withdrawal from care by registered mail. You will want to have proof that they got your letter.)

When a patient has been returned to their pre-injury condition and/or reached optimal function you will generally discharge them. This is particularly true when a third party such as an insurance company is paying for the treatment.

If this patient was referred to you by another professional you need to send a copy of the discharge letter to them. If the patient has only managed to reach a certain level of recovery, your letter should make reference to any pain or limitations which are expected to persist and affect their ability to work or perform the activities of daily living.

If you have to unilaterally discharge a patient who you no longer wish to see, it will be for one of three reasons:

- They are not following your advice
- They are behaving in ways you are uncomfortable with, or they are threatening or abusive
- You have decided to focus on certain types of cases, say maternity care, and no longer want to handle sports injury cases and geriatric care. If one of your patients is an 80 year old man with heel spurs and bad knees it is perfectly acceptable to discharge him from your care,

as long as you make every effort to find him someone else who can help with his knees and his feet while you tend to your mothers-to-be

This letter will, as is appropriate:

- Outline the reasons for terminating the therapeutic relationship
- Describe the instructions given which were not followed
- Describe specific behaviors and any discussions of the consequences of non-compliance
- Specify the date that treatment will end and give them enough notice that they can find another practitioner with no gaps in their care
- Identify the patient's need for continued care and offer to transfer their records to a new practitioner

Suggested format of a letter for withdrawing services: from the BCCC Professional Conduct Handbook (2005). Appendix A: Withdrawing From Patient Care

Dear (Patient),

I wish to inform you / confirm that I am withdrawing from providing further services to you as you have persisted in refusing to follow my advice and treatment (or other reasons).

In my opinion, your condition requires further attention, so I suggest that you place yourself under the care of another practitioner without delay. If you require a referral to another professional, I can provide you with some names.

I will be available to treat you if you choose, for a reasonable period of time after you receive this letter to allow you to obtain another doctor, but in no event will I provide further services to you after (date).

With your consent, I will make available to your new healthcare provider your case history and information regarding the diagnosis and treatment you have received from me.

Sign/ date

Here are a couple of important questions and answers (also from BCCC Handbook)

*Q – Are there circumstances where a healthcare provider can withdraw services without giving advance notice to the patient?*

*A – Yes, if the healthcare provider feels threatened or harassed by the patient, s/he may withdraw from treatment without giving advance notice to the patient. The practitioner may halt treatment during the course of the visit or inform the*

*patient at the end of the visit that no further care will be provided, effective immediately. Withdrawal of treatment without notice in these circumstances (unless emergency treatment is required) should not be considered abandonment of the patient. Depending on the particular circumstances, further communication with the patient by a confirming letter may or may not be advisable.*

*Q – What if the patient terminates the doctor-patient relationship?*

*A – A patient does not need to give any notice to their healthcare provider. A patient may discharge their practitioner by giving notice orally or in writing, by not showing up for a scheduled appointment, or by refusing to undergo a recommended procedure. In some circumstances, it may be prudent to confirm the patient's termination of the relationship in writing in order to protect against a claim of abandonment.*

How much notice do you need to give? Enough time for them to find another healthcare provider. If you live in a populated area this should be relatively easy. In rural or remote communities it may take longer so take this into consideration.

Remember, in all cases of discharged patients (and, for that matter, all your patients) you will need to keep the file for 16 years, but the patient has a right to the information the file contains, so be prepared to provide a copy of the file for their new doctor.

Breaking up with a patient need not be hard – or permanent. If you've helped with this condition, they'll be back when they need your services again. Having a clear strategy and the right paperwork in place to properly discharge patients is an essential component of all healthcare practices.