



Standard of Practice: Ending the Physician–Patient Relationship (2022)

A **Standard of Practice** is the minimum standard of professional behavior and ethical conduct expected by the College on a specific issue.

Ending the Physician–Patient Relationship

Preamble

The College recognizes that the physician-patient relationship is unique and based upon trust, honesty, respect and a shared desire to improve health outcomes. In situations where the therapeutic relationship ceases to be effective, a physician may decide not to continue seeing a patient, as long as the reasons for that decision are not based on reasons that could be considered discriminatory.

Standard of Practice

The expectations outlined in this Standard of Practice apply only in circumstances where the physician-patient relationship is terminated by the physician as a result of a breakdown in the relationship or for other legitimate reasons. It does not apply in situations where the physician's involvement with a patient reaches its natural or expected conclusion, such as consultative care.

When ending the physician–patient relationship, a physician must:

1. make reasonable attempts to resolve the issue and only end the relationship if those attempts have been unsuccessful;
2. have reasonable grounds to end the relationship;
3. provide adequate notice to the patient or their representative; and
4. facilitate continuity of care and the transfer of medical records.

The College expects physicians to take reasonable steps to meet the above noted requirements as follows:

Make a Reasonable Effort to Resolve the Issue

Before terminating the relationship with a patient, the College expects a physician to make a reasonable effort to address the issue with the patient and to only move to termination if those efforts are unsuccessful. The efforts and the outcomes should be recorded on the patient's medical record.

The College recognizes that there are circumstances where a physician would not be required to attempt to resolve an issue with a patient prior to ending the relationship. In these situations, the physician is under no obligation to engage with the patient directly prior to ending the relationship. An example of such a circumstance includes a patient who is abusive or poses a safety risk to the physician, office staff, or other patients.

Have Reasonable Grounds to end the Relationship

A physician must have reasonable grounds for terminating the relationship. These should be recorded on the patient's medical record.

Examples of situations which may lead a physician to consider ending the physician-patient relationship may include but are not limited to:

- a) the patient displays threatening or abusive behaviour towards the physician or their medical office staff, including comments of a sexualized or racist nature;
- b) the patient poses a risk of harm to the physician or their medical office staff;
- c) the patient makes a clear declaration of non-confidence in the physician's ability to provide medical care;
- d) the patient engaged in prescription-related fraud;
- e) the patient frequently misses appointments without appropriate cause or notice;
- f) the patient has been absent from the practice for an extended period of time and the physician's office policy on terminating the relationship on this basis has been communicated ahead of time to the patient; or
- g) the physician is aware that the patient has relocated and/or that another physician has assumed the care of the patient.

The following may not be used as justification for ending the relationship (a non-exhaustive list):

- a) the medical care required by the patient is or will become complex, unless the care the patient requires is beyond the clinical competence of the physician (in this case the physician must refer the patient to another physician);
- b) the medical care takes the physician more time than required for other patients;
- c) the patient makes unhealthy lifestyle choices;

- d) the patient chooses not to follow the physician's advice;
- e) the patient has missed one appointment;
- f) on a prohibited ground of discrimination including race, colour, nationality, ethnic origin, social origin, religious creed, religion, age, disability, disfigurement, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, marital status, family status, source of income, and political opinion.

The College recognizes that there may be circumstances where a physician may remove patients from their practice to decrease their practice size. Circumstances may include, for example: the stage of the physician's career or the status of the physician's health/well-being. A physician must exercise their professional judgment, consistent with this standard of practice, in selecting which patients to remove from their practice. The method chosen must be fair, transparent, and compassionate, and take into consideration the medical needs of each patient.

Provide Adequate Notice

The College expects a physician to provide notification to the patient or their representative. The notification must:

- a) be in written form. If the physician gives verbal notification during an office visit, it must be followed up in writing;
- b) give the patient sufficient time to find an alternative physician taking into account the continuing care needs of the patient and the availability of other medical practitioners, but be no less than 30 days prior to date of termination; and
- c) include the reasons for why the relationship is being terminated, unless disclosure of the reasons could be reasonably expected to:
 - i. result in immediate and grave harm to the patient's mental or physical health and safety; or
 - ii. threaten the mental health or physical health or safety of another person or pose a threat to public safety.

Facilitate Continuity of Care and the Transfer of Medical Records

Despite ending the physician-patient relationship, a physician must:

- a) ensure appropriate follow-up on all laboratory and diagnostic imaging results for the patient;
- b) provide or arrange for care in relation to any urgent or serious medical conditions until the date of termination of the relationship;
- c) provide or arrange for any necessary emergency care;
- d) provide or arrange for any ongoing medications for a reasonable period of time;

- e) inform other health care providers to whom the physician has referred the patient or who have been providing assistance to the patient on the physician’s behalf that the physician will no longer be caring for the patient after the effective date; and
- f) transfer the patient’s medical records, if requested, in accordance with the College’s Practice Guideline on “Uninsured Services.”

Acknowledgements

CPSBC (2021) Ending the Patient-Registrant Relationship
CPSM (2019) Practice Management
CPSO (2017) Ending the Physician-Patient Relationship

Document History

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