

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS LETTER?

Key considerations for drafting a patient termination letter

It happens. Physicians may face situations where they need to terminate a relationship with a patient. When this occurs, special attention must be given to what you say and how you say it. The following example highlights a situation that leads to a patient termination letter.

Dr. Smith is part of a primary care practice. For the last year, he has dealt with a 54-year-old patient named Bev Jones. Ms. Jones has repeatedly scheduled and missed appointments, and then reacted by blaming others. In addition, she consistently displays a hostile attitude, questions Dr. Smith with information she found online, and is known for not adhering to treatment plans. The most recent incident involved Ms. Jones screaming at the receptionist, claiming that she already paid a bill (without evidence), and then knocking over a patient literature stand before storming out. After this, Dr. Smith decided to draft and send her a termination letter.

CAN YOU FIND THE AREAS OF CONCERN IN THIS VERSION OF THE LETTER?

Dear Ms. Jones,

Your behavior to our front staff on your last visit was unacceptable. We cannot tolerate such a scene in our office. You have shown a long history of repeated anger and hostility to our staff. In addition, you have "no showed" three times in the last six months, and on several occasions, questioned my recommendations based on no understanding of established medical facts. Because of these issues, I have decided not to continue as your primary care provider. Please find another doctor. I will remain available to you for provisional care for seven (7) days following the date of this letter. Once your bill is paid in full, I will forward your medical record to your new doctor.

—Joseph Smith, MD

POINTS TO ADDRESS IN A PATIENT TERMINATION LETTER

- ✓ **Include a date to establish the timeline and send the letter via certified mail.**
- ✓ **Be succinct and avoid editorializing or restating your side of a dispute.** Dr. Smith used his letter to vent his frustrations and this can fuel hostility. We suggest not giving the reason for the dismissal in your letter. The letter should remain factual and avoid pejorative or emotional statements.
- ✓ **To prevent allegations of abandonment, provide a transition period of emergency care.** Many state medical boards designate the minimum number of days for a transition period. You should also consider the specific clinical situation, severity, and availability of resources that might increase that transition period (i.e., complicated pregnancy, long-duration therapy of infectious disease, etc.).
- ✓ **State that a new physician should be sought and that the patient's health plan/insurance might assist in providing names.**
- ✓ **Assure the patient that all medical records will be provided at his/her request.** Dr. Smith threatened to hold the medical records hostage until an outstanding bill was paid. Failure of payment is a separate issue and we suggest not mentioning it in a dismissal letter. Money owed is also not a legitimate reason for withholding records.
- ✓ **Be sure to include more detailed documentation in the administrative part of the medical record that outlines the decision to terminate the relationship.** We suggest keeping a copy of the letter in the administrative part of the chart and we would typically not share them with other providers.

OTHER CONCERNS

- ✓ Termination may not be based upon gender, race, religion, disability, ethnic origin, national origin, or age. Disability status can be complex and contentious. In addition, local laws might protect against discrimination based on issues such as sexual orientation.
- ✓ If someone is in serious ongoing treatment (e.g., chemotherapy or pregnancy), then arrangements for the next provider need to be definite. It may be necessary for the transition period to be longer than 30 days in certain situations due to ongoing medical care issues and the availability of other medical resources.
- ✓ Be cautious when terminating patients who are members of managed care plans. Your contracts with plans might specify the manner of termination with a member patient. Furthermore, plans might need notification of the reason for termination to prevent allegations of dismissing a patient because he/she is “too expensive to treat.” The patient might also have different time constraints for the health plan to complete reassignment to a new physician.

A MORE APPROPRIATE LETTER WOULD BE AS FOLLOWS:

Dear Ms. Jones,

I have decided not to continue as your primary care provider. Your insurance carrier may be able to assist you in finding another practitioner. I will remain available to you for provisional care for [insert # of days] following the date of this letter.

To ensure continuity of care, please try to transfer to a new care provider as quickly as possible and within the time period noted above. I will forward your medical record to your new practitioner upon your request to do so. Please sign the attached authorization form and let us know where you would like your records sent.

Sincerely,
Joseph Smith, MD