

Terminating Doctor-Patient Relationships

Doctor-patient relationships end for a number of reasons...

- Moving to another location
- Dissatisfaction with care they are receiving
- Can't afford fees
- Unhappy with waiting too long in the waiting room

Doctors may initiate termination due to:

- Patient requires the care of a specialist
- Patient is uncooperative or does not follow medical advice
- Patient does not keep appointments
- Patient does not pay bills
- Patient is disruptive/unpleasant to staff

Whether the end of the doctor-patient relationship is initiated by the patient or physician, safeguards should be taken to ensure the relationship is legally ended and does not endanger the patient.

The process for discharging a patient should always be handled cordially and professionally. It is customary for the withdrawing doctor to provide a photocopy of the patient's chart at the patient's request; under no circumstances should a physician refuse to provide a subsequent treating doctor with a copy of a medical record because the patient has not paid for medical services. Withholding records and/or medical information exposes the doctor to liability should the patient suffer an injury because another doctor did not have access to important information in the medical records.

The decision to end a doctor-patient relationship should be made by the doctor – not by the office staff. The doctor should send the patient a termination letter by certified mail, with a return receipt requested. The letter should inform the patient of the doctor's intention to withdraw from care and, optionally, state the reasons.