Discharging problem patients the right way

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Discharging patients is not pleasant, but it is often prudent and necessary. Because of the legal and ethical implications of patient dismissal, it is helpful to get practical guidance on how to correctly terminate a patient.

WE FIND THAT most patient terminations fall into one of four categories:

- patients who are verbally abusive or threatening to providers or staff;
- patients who are noncompliant with their care—missing appointments and/or recommended testing;
- patients who “doctor shop” and often are most interested in obtaining medications; and
- patients who do not pay for the care you provide.

Regardless of why the patient is being terminated, the termination letter itself should be straightforward and contain four elements:

- the notification itself,
- the effective date,
- the reason for the termination, and
- an offer to provide a copy of the records to the physician assuming the patient’s care.

Notification and effective date

Begin with a straightforward sentence stating that the patient is being discharged from the practice. The letter should include an effective date that is at least 30 days beyond the date the letter is mailed. We recommend that this period be extended 45 days to 60 days if you practice in a specialty or geographic area where it may take patients longer to find another physician, or if you are currently providing care for an ongoing condition.

During the period between your letter and the patient termination date, offer to provide emergency care only. Our practice refills necessary prescriptions but otherwise avoids providing non-acute care during this period.

You are not required to suggest alternative providers in your letter, nor do we recommend doing so. We do not like it when other groups refer their “problem” patients to us, so we do not recommend that our problem patients contact specific physicians or groups. Our discharge letters simply say we are providing ample time for the patient to find another provider.

Transparency

We think it is appropriate to provide a reason for the patient’s discharge. Even if the patient does not like the reason, they have a right to know why they are being discharged.

More and more patients are being discharged because they are unable to pay their bills. It’s unfortunate, but it is a reality and there is nothing illegal about doing so. Just as patients who do not show up for appointments are violating the physician-patient relationship, so too are patients who receive care but do not pay for it.

Finally, patients have a right to a copy of their medical records. Your letter should offer to make a copy of these records available to the patient or their new physician. You do not need to provide a copy of your medical records with the termination letter.

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