

PATIENT DISMISSAL: TERMINATION OF PATIENT

1. When can I properly terminate a patient?

The most important issue in terminating a patient is timing. The second most important is communication and/or documentation. As with other questions, the Board of Regents Rules provides the guidepost. Unprofessional conduct includes “abandoning or neglecting a patient or client under and in need of immediate professional care, without making reasonable arrangement for the continuation of such care.” A dentist should not terminate a patient in the middle of treatment. Rather, if there is a termination, it should be done at a point in time when there is no immediate follow-up care necessary. If there is temporary work, such as crown preparation or temporary restoration, this is not a normal stopping point. If there is a termination, a dentist should do so in writing indicating to the patient that the dentist/patient relationship is over, the reason for the termination, a statement that the dentist will remain available for a reasonable period of time (30 day is standard) for any dental emergencies. The reasons for the termination should also be noted in the patient’s record.

2. What are proper reasons for terminating a patient?

This question is easier to answer in the reverse. That is, you may terminate a patient for many reasons; however, you may not terminate a patient for a discriminatory reason. For instance, it would be considered discriminatory to terminate a disabled patient because you do not want to accommodate the individual. It is entirely appropriate to terminate patient because the patient fails to pay an outstanding balance, has been difficult with you or with office staff, has threatened a lawsuit, has broken appointments or simply because the dentist wants to reduce the number of his/her patients.

3. Must I wait until a normal stopping point to terminate a patient who has been physically threatening?

If a patient threatens to assault or actually assaults you or a member of your staff, the best thing is to contact the police immediately. You should discharge the patient immediately and make appropriate arrangements for any immediate care that the patient may need. If the patient has not actually crossed this line, but has still created a scene or unreasonably disrupted your office, you will want to make other arrangements to have any immediate dental care handled and terminate the relationship. The important thing is to make it clear to the individual that you will not tolerate such conduct in your office. You should be careful to document the threat or assault and to contact the appropriate authorities.