



STATE OF WASHINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Olympia, Washington 98504

NOTICE OF ADOPTION OF A POLICY STATEMENT

Title of Policy Statement: Terminating the Practitioner-Patient Relationship | POL2022-03

Issuing Entity: Washington Medical Commission

Subject Matter: Appropriate steps to terminate the relationship between allopathic physicians or physician assistants and their patients

Effective Date: March 4, 2022

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Policy Statement



WASHINGTON
**Medical
Commission**
Licensing, Accountability, Leadership.

Title:	Terminating the Practitioner-Patient Relationship	POL2022-03
References:	None	
Contact:	Washington Medical Commission	
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Effective Date:	March 4, 2022	
Approved By:	John Maldon, Chair (signature on file)	

The Washington Medical Commission (WMC) recommends that practitioners take appropriate steps to properly terminate the practitioner-patient relationship.

A practitioner-patient relationship is established when the practitioner agrees to advise, diagnose or treat a patient and the patient agrees that the practitioner will advise, diagnose or treat the patient. Once a practitioner-patient relationship has been established, a practitioner is ethically and legally obligated to provide services until the relationship is terminated.

A practitioner may decide to terminate the relationship for a number of reasons, including dismissing patients who are violent or verbally abusive, non-compliant with a treatment plan, fail to show up at appointments, or intentionally misuse prescription medications that violate chronic pain agreements. A patient may also decide to terminate the relationship and seek care from another provider. Regardless of the reason, the WMC recommends that practitioners act professionally and take appropriate steps to properly terminate the practitioner-patient relationship.

To properly terminate the practitioner-patient relationship, the practitioner should provide notice to the patient that the practitioner-patient relationship has been terminated. The notice should include the following elements:

1. A statement that the practitioner-patient relationship is terminated;
2. A statement that the practitioner will continue to provide emergency treatment and access to services for a reasonable time, such as 30 days from the date of the notice, to allow the patient to secure care from another practitioner, except where the patient has displayed disruptive or threatening behavior toward the practitioner, office staff or other patients; and
3. An offer to transfer records to a new practitioner upon the patient's signed authorization to do so, or providing the records directly to the patient, unless excluded by RCW 70.02.090.

There is no legal requirement for a practitioner to provide a reason for the termination of the relationship, but the practitioner may choose to do so depending on the circumstances. Under

appropriate circumstances, the practitioner may choose to provide the patient with physician referral sources.

The notice should be sent in one of the following ways:

1. A letter sent via certified mail, return receipt requested, to the last address for the patient on record, with a copy of the letter, the certified return receipt, and the mail delivery receipt maintained in the patient record; or
2. An electronic message sent via a HIPAA-compliant electronic medical record system or HIPAA-compliant electronic health record system that provides a means of electronic communication between the health care entity and the patient, is capable of sending the patient a notification that a message has been received in the patient's portal, and is capable of notifying the sender that a message has or has not been viewed. If the electronic message is not viewed within ten days, the practitioner should send a letter as recommended, above.

Following these recommendations will help a practitioner meet the ethical and legal obligations to a patient, and help avoid a complaint to the WMC that a practitioner abandoned a patient.