



College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia

Communications Briefing Note

Ending the Patient-Physician Relationship

College position

The patient-physician relationship is a fiduciary relationship based on honesty, respect and trust, where the physician prioritizes the patient's care and well-being, and acknowledges the patient's autonomy with regard to personal choice, including lifestyle or treatment options.

In situations where the relationship ceases to be effective, however, a physician may choose to stop treating a patient. The decision to end the patient-physician relationship must not be based on reasons that may be considered discriminatory under the BC Human Rights Code, including race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, religion, marital status, family status, physical or mental disability, sex, sexual orientation, and age.

Similarly, physicians must not end a patient-physician relationship based on the complexity of a patient's care needs, such as chronic pain, addiction or mental illness. In such cases, patients must be counselled, cared for and prescribed appropriate medications with due caution, based on well-documented assessments.

Allegations of discrimination are carefully investigated on a case-by-case basis and may be sustained by the College where impact is demonstrated even if the physician did not intentionally discriminate.

Situations where ending the patient-physician relationship would not be appropriate:

- The patient's care is considered too complex and difficult to treat.
- The patient's objectionable behaviour is reasonably attributable to cognitive impairment, unless it is determined that the patient poses a significant safety risk to the physician and/or staff.
- The patient respectfully declines to follow the physician's advice.
- The patient seeks treatment to which the physician objects on the basis of scientific, conscience or religious beliefs.
 - **Note:** When care is transferred to a willing physician with the consent of the patient, this will not be construed as improperly terminating the patient-physician relationship.

Situations where ending the patient-physician relationship may be appropriate:

- The patient exhibits threatening or abusive behaviour towards the physician or their medical office staff, including behaviour or comments of a sexualized nature. As employers, physicians have a legal obligation to make reasonable efforts to ensure that their employees are afforded a harassment-free workplace.
- The patient poses a risk of harm to the physician or their medical office staff.
- The patient makes an unambiguous declaration of non-confidence in the physician, where a patient's behaviour makes it clear that the practice is not being used as a primary care home by (for example) repeatedly attending at other clinics unnecessarily.
- The physician chooses to reduce the number of patients in their practice due to personal health or similar reasons.
 - **Note:** In this instance, the physician must not selectively discharge difficult or complex patients and take care not to be perceived to have otherwise discriminated. The process of patient selection must be well documented and consistently applied.

Reference

- College Practice Standard: [Ending the Patient-Physician Relationship](#)
- Document: [Patient-Physician Relationship – What to Expect](#)