

PRACTICE STANDARD

Availability and Coverage

Effective: June 1, 1995

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Version: 6.1

Related topic(s): [Access to Medical Care Without Discrimination](#); [Leaving Practice](#); [Primary Care Provision in Walk-in, Urgent Care and Multi-licensee Clinics](#); [Referral-Consultation Process](#); [Withdrawal of Medical Services During Job Action](#)

A **practice standard** reflects the minimum standard of professional behaviour and ethical conduct on a specific topic or issue expected by CPSBC of its licensees (all physicians and surgeons who practise medicine in British Columbia). Standards also reflect relevant legal requirements and are enforceable under the *Health Professions and Occupations Act*, SBC 2022, c.43 (*HPOA*) and the CPSBC Bylaws under the *HPOA*.

Preamble

This document is a practice standard established by the Board of CPSBC. For further information, review the [Availability and Coverage FAQs](#).

Definitions

Critical test result: Any values/interpretations for which delays in reporting can result in serious adverse outcomes for patients.

Temporary leaves of absence: Vacations and leaves of absence (e.g. parental leave, educational leave), as well as unplanned absences due to illness or family emergencies.

Timely manner: Refers to responding within a period that is appropriate to the specific circumstances, considering factors such as when a message was received and the potential impact a delay may have on patient safety.

CPSBC's position

After-hours coverage

Licensees must:

- Consider their patients' needs, the nature of their practice, and their service expectations to ensure appropriate coverage is available to their patients when needed (for example, to manage post-procedure complications, or respond to critical test results).
- Ensure their patients are informed about how and where to access care outside of regular office hours. This includes details of any specific coverage arrangements made, and other available resources such as HealthLink BC, walk-in clinics, or urgent care centres, as appropriate.
- Direct patients to emergency departments only when clinically indicated.
- Assign any necessary after-hours coverage to groups of licensees or to local emergency departments only if all parties have agreed to this arrangement in advance. This does not apply in emergency situations where directing patients to call 911 remains appropriate.

Managing critical information and communication

Critical test results

- To the best of their ability, licensees must ensure critical test results can be received, reviewed, and acted upon in a timely manner, including outside regular office hours and during temporary absences.

Communication and messaging

- Licensees must have a telephone system that:
 - is answered during business hours or allows patients to leave messages which are reviewed and responded to in a timely manner; and

- includes an up-to-date outgoing message with office hours, closures, and clear instructions for accessing after-hours or alternate care.
- Licensees who offer electronic means of secure communication must ensure that messages are reviewed and responded to in a timely manner.

Absences and continuity of care

- In cases of temporary leaves of absence, licensees must:
 - make reasonable efforts to arrange appropriate coverage for patient care during the absence,
 - clearly inform patients where to seek care during the absence,
 - when necessary for patient care, notify others involved in their patients' care of their absence and any coverage arrangements made, and
 - establish specific coverage arrangements with another health-care provider to provide or coordinate necessary on-going care during the absence (e.g. ensuring critical test results and consultation reports are handled appropriately).
- In cases involving extended absences, licensees must:
 - consider the availability and adequacy of alternative resources for the care, ongoing monitoring and transfer of patients,
 - inform their patients of the most appropriate alternative care options, and
 - make arrangements for communication or consultation to ensure the appropriate transfer of care of patients to other licensees or facilities.

References

1. College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (2019). *Availability and coverage*.