



College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia

Professional Standards and Guidelines

After-Hours Coverage

Preamble

This document is a standard of the Board of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia.

It also offers broader guidance on this issue, reflecting the ethical, professional and legal obligation of all physicians to provide appropriate ongoing and after-hours coverage for their patients in order to ensure continuity of medical care. The focus is on the physician's ethical, professional and legal obligation to provide appropriate ongoing and after-hours coverage for all patients under his or her care.

College's Position

- The provision of ongoing medical care is not only the responsibility of the family physician, but also of specialists and other focused-practice physicians who are involved in the treatment of patients.
- Physicians cannot exempt themselves from this professional responsibility by identifying the locations at which they work as, for example, urgent care centres or walk-in clinics.
- It is not possible for individual physicians to provide continuous ongoing medical care without a schedule of on-call availability that permits them to share that responsibility with colleagues. Where a medical staff shortage, either due to human resourcing issues or unanticipated absences, impacts ongoing medical care it is expected that those physicians who remain available will advise patients of the most appropriate alternatives based on the specific situation.
- Physicians may assign on-call coverage to groups of physicians or to local emergency departments if all parties have agreed to this arrangement in advance. It is not appropriate to leave a message for patients telling them to go to an emergency department for after-hours, non-urgent care if this has not been arranged with and agreed to by the physicians in the emergency department.
- Physicians are responsible for ensuring that on-call or after-hours coverage arrangements are clearly communicated within their on-call groups, and that their colleagues and other health-care professionals who may need to communicate with them about follow-up of diagnostic tests and other ongoing care issues are appropriately informed.

- Physicians must also ensure that their patients are aware of the on-call or after-hours coverage that is available to them.
- A physician who must be absent from practice for medical or other reasons must communicate with office staff, colleagues and local hospitals to ensure that patient care is not compromised.

Conclusion

- In many situations, responsibility for determining on-call scheduling and responsibility falls to community hospitals or health authorities who privilege or directly contract physicians to provide services.
- Where there is no hospital or health authority involvement, physicians should take responsibility for ensuring appropriate coverage, and for communicating on-call or after-hours coverage arrangements with colleagues and patients.

Physicians may seek advice on this issue by contacting the College and asking to speak with a member of the registrar staff.

Guiding Ethical Principles

CMA Code of Ethics

Fundamental Responsibilities or section name

1. Consider first the well-being of the patient.

Initiating and Dissolving a Patient-Physician Relationship

19. Having accepted professional responsibility for a patient, continue to provide services until they are no longer required or wanted; until another suitable physician has assumed responsibility for the patient; or until the patient has been given reasonable notice that you intend to terminate the relationship.

References

College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta. Standards of practice: the minimum standard of professional behavior and good practice expected of Alberta physicians [Internet]. Edmonton, AB: College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta; 2010. Standard 32, After-hours access to care; [cited 2012 Oct 30]; [1 p.].

College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan [Internet]. Saskatoon, SK: College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan. Medical Practice Coverage; [cited 2012 Sep 12].

Questions and Answers

After-Hours Coverage

Do all physicians have an obligation to provide after-hours care for their patients?

Yes, all physicians have an ethical, professional and legal responsibility to provide continuity of care for their patients. While specific situations may differ, the principle that physicians should provide, directly or indirectly, after-hours coverage for their patients is one that applies to all physicians.

Do specialists have to provide after-hours care?

Yes, specialists, like family physicians, are expected to provide after-hours care for their patients. This responsibility applies to the medical or surgical conditions for which they are involved in the treatment of the patient.

Do family physicians working in walk-in clinics have to provide after-hours care?

Any family physician or group of family physicians who provide primary care are expected to have after-hours coverage provisions in place.

Is after-hours care by family physicians a non-insured service?

This issue is not within the scope or responsibility of the College. However, it is the opinion of the College that the responsibility to provide after-hours coverage is an ethical and professional one.

Is it appropriate to leave a voice message on the telephone directing patients to attend the local emergency room for after-hours non-urgent care?

No, unless this has been agreed to between you and the group of physicians who work at that emergency room.