

## Case 1.4: Terminating the Patient-Physician Relationship—Saying Goodbye to Mr. Jones

### Case Presentation

Almost a year has passed since Mr. Jones became Dr. Stevens' patient. During that time Mr. Jones has not adhered to the treatment plan for his diabetes. Although Mr. Jones maintains that he watches his diet, he has gained ten pounds and admits that he does not exercise as he should. His insurance provides prescription coverage, but he does not always refill his diabetes medications in time to assure continuous dosages. Mr. Jones's health is slipping to the point where he might need to switch to insulin by injection.

Reasoning with Mr. Jones about the consequences of non-adherence to his chronic illness management regimen has not worked. Since Mr. Jones appears competent, Dr. Stevens doesn't understand his failure to follow through on the agreed-upon treatment plan and is considering terminating his relationship with Mr. Jones. Dr. Stevens' practice is rapidly growing, with a waiting list of prospective patients.

### What should Dr. Stevens do about Mr. Jones? (select an option)

- A. [Write Mr. Jones a letter stating that he has not been adhering to his treatment plan and that he should look for a new doctor immediately.](#)
- B. [Inform the appointment desk that if Mr. Jones calls for an appointment, he is not to be given one and should be told that Dr. Stevens is no longer his doctor.](#)
- C. [Write Mr. Jones a letter stating that they seem to be having difficulty agreeing on an appropriate treatment plan and suggest that it might be in Mr. Jones's best interests to see another physician.](#)
- D. [Write Mr. Jones a letter requesting that they meet in the next two weeks and review his treatment plan.](#)

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### Option Assessment

- A. Telling Mr. Jones that Dr. Stevens' services are terminated "effective immediately" should be **avoided**. Opinion 8.115, "Termination of the Physician-Patient Relationship" obligates the physician to give "... notice... sufficiently long in advance of withdrawal to permit another medical attendant to be secured."
- B. Ignoring Mr. Jones's request for an appointment should be **avoided**. While patient-physician relationships can be terminated by either party, Opinion 8.115, "Termination of the Patient-Physician Relationship" obligates the physician to give "notice...sufficiently long in advance of withdrawal to permit another medical attendant to be secured." Moreover, refusing to see a patient without sufficient notice and without noting the patient's medical condition may constitute neglect; Opinion 8.11, "Neglect of Patient" states: "Once having undertaken a case, the physician should not neglect the patient."
- C. Writing Mr. Jones a letter expressing what Dr. Stevens sees as the difficulty in their particular patient-physician relationship is an **acceptable** option. Expressing concern and recommending another physician does not violate Opinion 8.115, "Termination of the Patient-Physician Relationship." Dr. Stevens is providing "notice sufficiently long in advance of withdrawal to permit another medical attendant to be secured." Given the potential harm Mr. Jones could incur if he continues to ignore his treatment plan, Dr. Stevens is correct in addressing the issue.
- D. Talking with Mr. Jones directly about what Dr. Stevens sees as a difficulty in their relationship is the **preferred** option. This conversation will give Dr. Stevens adequate time to explain his reason for withdrawing from the relationship with Mr. Jones and give him the opportunity to express his hope that Mr. Jones's relationship with another doctor might be more effective. Moreover, Dr. Stevens will not violate Opinion 8.115, "Termination of the Patient-Physician Relationship," which obligates the physician to give "notice...sufficiently long in advance of withdrawal to permit another medical attendant to be secured."

#### [Compare these options](#)

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### Option Comparison

Options C and D—writing the patient a letter stating that there appears to be a difficulty in their relationship or discussing this difficulty directly with Mr. Jones—are both acceptable. D is the preferred option because it gives Dr. Stevens and Mr. Jones the chance to discuss the nature of the difficulty, leaving open the possibility for a resolution and a continuation of the relationship. Options A and B—immediate termination of the patient-physician relationship or rejecting the request for an appointment—should be avoided because immediate termination either through implication or direct notification violates the *Code of Medical Ethics*.

Preferable: Option D

Acceptable: Option C

Avoided: Options A and B

#### [Additional discussion and information](#)

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## **Case 1.4: Terminating the Patient-Physician Relationship—Saying Goodbye to Mr. Jones**

### **Additional Information**

At times the relationship between patient and physician can be perceived as "difficult" by either the patient or the physician. Physicians might label a patient as difficult when they perceive him or her to be demanding or refusing to follow the agreed-upon treatment plan. Studies conducted in this area suggest that a difficult patient-physician relationship emerges from the conflicting expectations and misunderstood behaviors on the part of both patient and physician.

Putting concerns to patients in writing is not unusual when talking with the patient does not seem to be effective or when documentation is prudent. The written communication must be clear about what will occur next. Requesting that the patient come in for an appointment to discuss what seems to be a problem situation demonstrates courtesy and respect. Illness can make people feel vulnerable and unsure of the future. Rather than accelerating the difficulty, the physician can facilitate a discussion in which the problem is acknowledged, both patient and physician's perspectives are identified, the physician tries to understand his or her own reactions to the patient's behavior, and there is an attempt to negotiate grounds for continuing the relationship.

Nonetheless, knowing if and when to refer a patient is also important. When a physician terminates the relationship and patients do not fully understand why, they may feel that they are being punished or abandoned by their doctor. These feelings may create hesitancy for the patient to seek additional medical care.

Physicians who terminate a relationship with a patient, must give the patient sufficient time to find another physician. Patients, especially those with diagnosed conditions, have the right to expect "continuity of care." Without sufficient notice the patient's health can be put into severe jeopardy necessitating emergency treatment.

Although some state laws require 30 days notice, in other states "sufficiency of notice" is an open time frame that will vary from patient to patient and situation to situation. With patients for whom a transfer can be made relatively easily, "sufficient" may be the time it takes to transfer of records to the physician in the next office. In other situations, 30 days may be necessary. Prudence suggests giving the patient a reasonable period of time to accept the termination emotionally and secure a new physician. In those situations where the patient does not wish to accept alternative sources of health care, it is in the best interests of the patient and physician to have a clear date by which the physician will no longer accept responsibility for the patient.

### [Module 1 Feedback Questionnaire](#)

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# Module 1: Patient-Physician Relationship

## Feedback Questionnaire

In Module 1 on the patient-physician relationship, how would you rate the relevance of clinical cases?

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

How would you rate the explanation of courses of action?

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

How would you rate the overall coverage of the topic?

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

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