



Medical Council of New Zealand

Ending a doctor-patient relationship

If a doctor wants to end a doctor-patient relationship with a patient it must be done in a professional and fair manner. A doctor may only end the professional relationship if he or she is confident that the patient is not acutely in need of immediate care or that care of the patient has already been accepted by another doctor.

Introduction

1. The doctor-patient relationship may end after any length of time. Commonly it is because the patient is moving to another area or chooses to see another doctor.
2. There are some occasions when there is a break down in the doctor-patient relationship and in such situations it is decided by either the doctor or patient to discontinue the professional relationship.
3. Any decision by a doctor to discontinue a doctor-patient relationship should be done on the grounds that the doctor is prepared to justify the decision if called on to do so.

Process for discontinuation of care

4. The process to the end the professional relationship must be clear, so that the patient no longer has any expectations of continuing care from the doctor.
 - Tell the patient that the professional relationship is ended. If possible, provide a reason why the relationship has been discontinued.
 - Note this termination in the patient's records.
 - Refer the patient to another doctor of the patient's choice (or in the case of a specialist, back to the usual general practitioner).
 - Send a letter of referral (or reporting letter) and all relevant information about the patient to that new doctor or general practitioner. Medical indemnity organisations may advise the doctor to keep original notes, but copies must be provided at no cost.
5. Only after all the above steps are completed does the Council consider the doctor-patient relationship to be officially discontinued.

Breakdown of doctor-patient relationship

6. If there is a breakdown in the doctor-patient relationship it is advisable to assist the patient to locate an alternative doctor and/or to give the patient sufficient notice so that the patient can find another doctor.
7. In situations where there is any possibility of a complaint from a patient it is advisable that the doctor contacts his or her medical indemnity representative before initiating the process to discontinue care for the patient.
8. It is inappropriate and unethical for a doctor to end a doctor-patient relationship for the sole purpose of initiating a sexual relationship with that patient.

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