



## Ending a doctor-patient relationship

*If you want to end a doctor-patient relationship with a patient it must be done in a professional and fair manner. You may only end the professional relationship if you are 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 commonly ends because the patient is moving to another area or chooses to see another doctor.
2. There are some occasions when the doctor-patient relationship breaks down and either you or the patient decides to discontinue the professional relationship.
3. If you decide to discontinue a doctor-patient relationship then you must be able to justify the decision.
4. This statement may be used by the Health Practitioner's Disciplinary Tribunal, the Council and the Health and Disability Commissioner as a standard by which your conduct when ending a doctor-patient relationship is measured.

### Process for discontinuation of care

5. The process to the end the professional relationship must be clear, so that the patient no longer has any expectations of continuing care from you.
  - Tell the patient that the professional relationship is ended. You should also provide a reason why the relationship has been discontinued.
  - Note the 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 referral letter (or reporting letter) to that new doctor or general practitioner. Information provided to your colleague should be clinical, relevant and objective. Medical indemnity organisations may advise you to keep original notes, but you must provide copies at no cost.

6. If a patient expresses a concern about the content of records to be transferred to another doctor, you should provide him or her with the opportunity to review them. It is not appropriate to allow the patient to make or request changes to these records, but it can be useful to offer to forward their comments with the records.
7. 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

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

### March 2011

**This statement is scheduled for review by March 2016. Legislative changes may make this statement obsolete before this review date.**

### Other relevant resources

- *Good medical practice*
- *Sexual boundaries in the doctor-patient relationship.*