Handling The Difficult Problem of Dismissing A Patient

One of the least pleasant tasks that a dentist may have to consider is the dismissal of a patient. For a variety of reasons, a dentist-patient relationship may begin to deteriorate. Sometimes this results from a single incident. More often, it is the result of a series of problems that incrementally build one on another. Finally, it may become apparent that the relationship is no longer co-operative and trusting; in fact, it may even be antagonistic. When this occurs, it may be beneficial to both parties that they go their separate ways.

Before coming to the conclusion that it is necessary to dismiss a patient, it may be worthwhile to re-examine the events that led to this juncture, and consider whether or not all reasonable efforts have been made to address the problems.

- Is the problem a result of miscommunication?
  - It may be useful to attempt to speak with the patient directly and clarify matters.
- Is there a disagreement regarding treatment options?
  - It may be appropriate to refer the patient for a second opinion.
- Is the patient’s account in arrears?
  - New payment terms may be offered and agreed upon.
- Is the problem related to treatment outcome?
  - It may be possible and prudent to resolve the patient’s concerns.

In accordance with good recordkeeping practices, your patient records should include details of any relevant problems and issues, as well as notations of all communication with the patient.

If your conclusion is that dismissal is the best decision, the patient should be informed in an appropriate fashion, preferably in writing.

Your letter should be polite, professional, and to the point. It should avoid words or phrases that might inflame the situation. Rather, it should attempt to present the termination of the relationship as being in the patient’s best interest. (See the sample provided with this story on the opposite page.)

A well constructed letter should address the following five areas:

1. Provide the patient with the reason for their dismissal. For example, the patient is unwilling to follow through with recommended treatment, or is demonstrating a lack of confidence in your abilities, or is disruptive to office routine and abusive to the staff, or is not complying with agreed upon payment terms, etc.
2. Outline any treatment needs that the patient should have attended to in a timely manner. For example, the patient may still require specified fillings or should have a root canal treated tooth crowned.

3. Provide the patient with the means of obtaining the services of a new dentist. Your letter might provide the telephone number of a local dental society or the Ontario Dental Association so that the patient can obtain a list of dentists in the area.

3. Inform the patient that you will forward copies of any records or radiographs that may be of assistance to the new dentist. The patient must authorize the transfer of records and clearly indicate where they are to be sent. If the patient indicates that the records are to be sent to their home address, you should comply with their request. The College recommends that you retain the original records and provide copies.

4. Inform the patient that, until they have obtained the services of a new dentist, you will agree to attend to any true emergency situation.

5. You might also provide the telephone number of a local dental emergency service. Note that this information may be provided in addition to, but not in place of, your offer to render emergency care.

If you have any questions, please contact:

**Dr. Lesia Waschuk**
Practice Advisor
phone: 416-934-5614
toll-free: 1-800-565-4591
e-mail: lwaschuk@rcdso.org

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**SAMPLE PATIENT DISMISSAL LETTER**

**Dear Mrs. Smith:**

I am writing to you following your last scheduled dental appointment that was on June 13, 2005. On this date, you were to attend my office to have a lost filling replaced. When you failed to show at the appointed time, my receptionist contacted you by telephone. You informed her that you were too busy to leave work. This was the fourth time this year that you did not keep a scheduled appointment.

You will remember that we have had several discussions on the subject of missed appointments. Additionally, I wrote to you and clearly provided my office policies regarding this subject in a letter dated May 30, 2005.

If a dentist-patient relationship is to be successful, co-operation is essential. Obviously, I cannot treat you if you do not attend your scheduled appointments. I can only conclude that either you do not value the appointment time that is set aside for you, or my office is not convenient to your needs. Whatever the reason, it is with regret that I must insist you seek the services of another dentist.

In order to prevent further damage to your lower left tooth, please arrange to have your new dentist replace the lost filling as soon as possible.

If you require assistance in locating a new dentist, you may wish to contact the Ontario Dental Association for a list of dentists in your area. The ODA telephone number is 416-922-3900. I will be pleased to forward copies of your records at your written request. Should the need arise before you find a new dentist, I am prepared to see you on an emergency basis or, if you prefer, assist you in making arrangements at another suitable dental office.