

RESPONDING TO PATIENT COMPLAINTS

The following examples describe patient situations that may have arisen in your own facility. Each example required a reply from either the physician or the clinic administrator. The examples are followed by sample reply letters that demonstrate responses to the various issues raised by each situation.

The sample reply letters are intended as suggestions, not templates, for responding to patient complaints. Each actual complaint has unique features that cannot be addressed in a "boilerplate" letter. When drafting your own reply, you may choose to incorporate phrases from the samples.

Example #1:

A patient has complained in a letter that her doctor did not treat her condition appropriately, resulting in too many office visits. She does not want to pay the balance of her bill. Her letter is angry and states she will not return to the clinic for future care.

Example #2:

A patient has complained that her doctor was rude and abrasive to her. She complained by telephone call to the administrator and does not want to ever return to that doctor's care. She has a serious medical condition and needs continuing treatment.

Example #3:

A patient has been rude, abusive, and non-compliant with the physician's treatment, including failing many appointments. Now the patient is angry because he alleges the physician missed a diagnosis. The letter demands that the clinic write off the patient's bill, and threatens legal action; the physician's malpractice insurance carrier has been notified. This physician no longer wants to treat this patient and chooses not to waive the outstanding balance.

Sample Reply Letters

Situation #1

- Physician responding to angry patient leaving clinic
- Waiving bill or copay
- Helping patient transfer care

Example demonstrates how to:

- Recognize the emotion being expressed by the patient
- Express regret that the physician-patient relationship has broken down
- Waive the bill or copay
- Assist the patient in transferring care

Dear Mary:

I have received your letter and I understand that you are unhappy with the care you received at our clinic. We certainly try to please all of our patients, and I am sorry that there has been a breakdown in our relationship.

You have requested that your outstanding bill of \$249.00 be waived, and we are writing off that charge as a gesture of our good will. We regret losing you as a patient, and want to make your transition to a new provider as easy as possible. Enclosed you will find an authorization to release your medical records. When you find another physician, please send us the signed authorization designating where you would like a copy of your records sent and we will oblige.

We wish you the best of luck in the future.

Very truly yours,

Dr. Will Smith

Situation #2

- Clinic Administrator responding to angry patient leaving clinic
- Patient in need of immediate, ongoing care
- Helping patient transfer care

Example demonstrates how to:

- Acknowledge the problem described by the patient
- Assure the patient that the problem is being addressed within the clinic
- Express regret at the breakdown of the physician-patient relationship
- Alert the patient to the need for immediate care elsewhere
- Apologize for any inconvenience the patient has experienced

Dear Ms. Anderson:

We have received your complaint and it has been discussed within the quality review process of our clinic. All patient complaints are taken seriously and we want to assure you that the problem you brought to our attention is being addressed.

It is unfortunate that there has been an apparent breakdown in your relationship with Dr. Smith. As you are aware, your condition needs immediate follow up and medical attention. The risks of delaying treatment are (*describe in non-medical terms*). Please let us know as soon as you have decided upon another physician and we will transfer of your medical records. An authorization form is enclosed to expedite transferring your care to a physician of your choice. Please return it to us as soon as possible and we will forward your records.

We are sorry for any inconvenience you have experienced, and wish you the best of luck in the future.

Sincerely,

Ms. Della Street
Clinic Administrator

Situation #3

- Physician responding to angry patient alleging missed diagnosis
- Patient was noncompliant in care given
- Physician terminating services to patient
- Declining to waive outstanding bill

Example demonstrates how to:

- Acknowledge the emotion expressed by the patient
- Express sympathy for patient's difficulty
- Support care given as appropriate; refer to patient failures objectively
- Decline to waive the outstanding bill
- Express regret at the breakdown of the physician-patient relationship
- Inform the patient care is terminated, assist the patient in transferring care

Dear Mr. Anderson:

I have received your letter and understand you are very upset. The diagnosis you received must have been difficult for you and I am sorry for the ordeal you will undergo.

I reviewed your chart carefully and I believe that all of the care you received at this clinic was appropriate. Unfortunately, there were several failed appointments charted. While you

undoubtedly had reasons for missing the appointments, it is difficult for physicians to diagnose patients they do not see. Because I believe the care you received was entirely appropriate, I am unable to agree to waive your outstanding bill of \$750.00, as you requested. However, we are willing to discuss payment options with you.

You apparently feel there has been a breakdown in the doctor-patient relationship that is crucial to effective care and treatment. I feel this breakdown has occurred as well. I cannot continue to care for you under these circumstances. Every patient needs to be treated by a physician in whom they place their trust. I will treat you on an emergency basis for the next 30 days, or until you choose another physician, whichever comes first.

For your convenience, I am enclosing an authorization that will expedite transfer of your records to the physician of your choice. When you return it to the clinic, we will immediately send a copy of your chart to the designated physician.

I wish you the best of luck in the future.

Dr. Will Smith