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Preparing for the Times When You Will Be Absent from Your Practice

From time to time, you will need to be away from your practice. It may be because of an unplanned situation, such as a personal illness, an injury, a family emergency, or being called up to active military duty. It may be a planned absence -- a vacation, sabbatical, or for continuing medical education. Whatever the reason for your absence, your practice will be better off if you have taken steps well in advance to prepare for the inevitable times when you can't be present.

Finding a Substitute Physician

First and foremost, you'll need to make arrangements for patient coverage. You will most likely provide patient coverage from one of the following sources:

- o Partners. This option is typically most effective if your practice employs three or more physicians.
- o Retired Physicians. Your local medical society may maintain a list of retired physicians who are interested in providing short-term coverage. Check on malpractice insurance availability and cost and be sure the physician is licensed in your state. Preferably, whoever steps in will still be licensed and active in medical societies. Look for someone who practices in the same specialty or one closely related to yours and who is respected by your peers and your staff.
- o Locum Tenens. This is generally the most expensive option. If you choose this option, be sure to contact each managed care plan to make sure that the locum physician is approved for participation.
- o Colleagues. It may be possible for colleagues in your area to provide coverage for your patients. It's important to put the terms of the agreement in writing, including the schedule, the salary, and the estimated length of coverage.

Notifying Your Substitute About Patients with Special Needs

You or other practice members should ensure that your replacement has complete access to your patients' medical records. In addition, the substitute physician must be informed of any patients who may be at risk during your absence or who have special needs or requirements. Providing the substitute with a list of at-risk patients will help your practice run more smoothly and may help minimize any potential future legal issues.

Contacting Patients

You'll need to let your patients know that you will be absent from your practice and, if possible, the length of your absence. Send a letter that provides details about what arrangements you and your practice have made to meet patients' needs during your absence. Include the name of the covering physician, the practice's hours of operation, and how emergencies will be handled after office hours.

Malpractice Insurance Issues

If your absence will be lengthy, call your malpractice insurance carrier and ask for a suspension of your premiums and for them to start up again when you return to practice. If your replacement physician is working through a locum tenens company, the company will typically provide malpractice coverage for your replacement physician. Make certain you understand the policy's terms and whether it includes "tail coverage" to protect the practice after the temporary physician leaves. If you hire a substitute physician who is not affiliated with a placement company, you or your practice will typically have to provide malpractice insurance, as well as written proof of coverage for the substitute physician.

Hospital Privileges

You will need to contact hospitals where you have privileges well in advance of your absence and present all pertinent information to ensure that your covering physician will have temporary hospital privileges.

Whatever the reason for an absence from your practice, you can ensure full and safe coverage of your patients with careful planning.

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