

Tips To Protect Your Practice While You Are Away

While you're away:

1. Instruct staff not to release confidential information to any person without your advance approval.
2. Be attentive to potential breaches of confidentiality when using mobile phones, computers, faxes or voice mail - you may be overheard or the message may be intercepted by the wrong party.
3. Be wary of treating patients by telephone without a follow-up office visit as soon as possible.
4. Maintain documentation of all calls to and from a patient and to and from a third party concerning a patient. (A form the size of an index card with an adhesive backing that easily fits into a pocket or purse can be used to document calls received outside of the office and can be readily filed in the medical record upon your return to the office.)
5. Prepare patients for scheduled absences and make provisions for coverage. Be specific about the length of time of the absence, and the actual dates of your departure and return. Provide patients with written materials for their reference in your absence (e.g., a list of names and telephone numbers to call, dates of absence, etc.).
6. Always lock up prescription pads.
7. Leave specific instructions on your voice mail, with your office staff, and/or your answering service as to how patients may be directed to services for assistance in your absence. Always direct patient emergencies to the patient's local emergency room.
8. Provide your colleagues who are covering for you with pertinent information about your more "critical" patients. Make sure your charting/documentation is up-to-date for reference by those covering in your absence. Alternatively, leave a number with your colleagues where you can be reached in the event you need to be consulted in an emergency.
9. Your coverage instructions should include procedures for staff on how to deal with potentially or increasingly suicidal patients. After directing a patient per your coverage instruction, the staff should notify you immediately.
10. Try to anticipate medication refills and determine which of those will require on-going monitoring during your absence.
11. Save documentation such as airplane tickets, hotel bills, and coverage instructions. They will come in handy should you be accused of malpractice during a time period when you were, in fact, out of town.

Questions to answer when you are covering for colleagues:

- Do you know enough about those patients who might require continued assistance during your colleague's absence?
- Do you know how to gain access to pertinent medical information about patients?

- Are you certain about when your coverage begins (and ends) and to which institutions your colleague refers patients for hospitalization/inpatient care? Do you have privileges there?
- If your colleagues will be away for more than two weeks, who is expected to handle correspondence and nonmedical requests?

This information does not constitute legal advice. For legal advice contact your personal attorney.

For further risk management advice or risk management advice concerning a specific situation contact your risk insurance carrier.

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