

Close a practice productively with these tips



PMP Staff

Making the decision to close your practice is a big step. Whether

this decision stems from retirement plans, relocation or an unexpected life event, there are some steps to follow to ensure your practice closure is done properly.

If the practice closure is pre-planned, as in the case of retirement, it is generally true that the earlier you start planning, the better.

By planning far in advance, you may be able to schedule the closure effectively. For example, if leasing property it would be best to close following the end of your lease to avoid penalty fees.

As a physician considering closing a practice, consider two key questions: What is required of me

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Assist your patients

The College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) requires that you notify patients of your practice closing so they may look for new health care providers.

Accordingly, three major responsibilities you have to your patients are:

1. Notification: You should provide three-months' notice that your practice will be closing – or longer if erosion of your practice is not a concern. Notify patients through an advertisement in the newspaper, a notice on the front door of your office or through individual letters to each patient.

The Alberta Medical Association (AMA) Practice Management Program (PMP) recommends use of at least two modes of communication to make sure as many patients as possible have a chance to find other physicians before they have a desperate need for family health care.

2. Transfer of care: If another physician will not be taking over your practice, you may wish to assist patients in finding new providers by giving them a list of practitioners in your area who are accepting new patients, if there are any available.

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3. Transfer of medical records: Ensure patients know (ideally via your notices of practice closure) you are taking their medical records for secure storage. It is their responsibility to notify you in writing if they wish to have their records transferred to another provider.

You may also advise patients there will be a cost associated with transferring medical records. (The cost must be reasonable¹ and related to the costs you incur to copy and transfer a record. Find fee guidelines at www.oipc.ab.ca.)

Manage your medical records

A patient may not own his or her medical record, but has the right to access information in it and to obtain a copy of his or her chart.

Patient medical charts or records belong to the physician. The physician should retain and be able to access the original record in case of a malpractice suit or any other situation where there is a question about the care a patient has received. ▶

▶ CPSA guidelines state that if you are “unable to provide ongoing management of patient medical records, either personally or through a colleague, (your medical records) should be put into commercial storage for custody, transfer as necessary and destruction when that is appropriate.”²

The CPSA requires medical records for adults be kept for 10 years following the last date of service and, for minors, kept for two years past the patient’s 18th birthday or for 10 years past the last date of service, whichever is longer.

Following this retention period, records must be destroyed by secure and confidential shredding, burning or erasure in the case of electronic medical records.

Determining physician ownership of records is slightly more complex when practising as part of a group within a shared-care model. PMP strongly recommends you have a practice agreement that includes a clause outlining an agreed-upon procedure for archiving medical records.

If you do not have a practice agreement, and your practice is dissolving or a physician is leaving, a mutually acceptable framework should be put in place to determine the “most responsible physician”² for each patient.

If the clinic has functioned with all physicians seeing any and all patients without any assignment of patients to a physician, the medical records belong to the clinic rather than any one physician and the records must stay there once a physician chooses to leave.

If the clinic is dissolving in this case, the owner of the clinic is the custodian of the records.

Help your staff

Some physicians will have staff who have faithfully assisted

them in their practices for years or even decades.

Long-term employees will most likely find your practice closure very stressful and might have legitimate concerns about their ability to find new employment elsewhere.

Newer members of your staff might also be surprised and stressed about the practice closure, particularly if the closure is sudden.

You can help staff members make the transition to their next positions by providing them with plenty of notice of the practice closure. Your staff should certainly know, ahead of patients, what you are planning.

Employees will be able to find other employment, and will be likely to repay your consideration by negotiating start dates at their new jobs that coincide with your practice closure.

You can also help valued staff move on to new opportunities by providing them with a strong reference (in writing or via phone conversation with their prospective employers) that reflects your appreciation of their work.

Consider these other things

Other things to think about when planning to close your practice include:

- Retention of business records such as accounting documents and employment records
- Length of notice to give physician partners and how to discuss your departure with your partners
- Your trailing financial obligations to your group practice
- Notification and appropriate severance of employee employment
- Professional notifications (e.g., to Alberta Health and Wellness and Alberta Health Services)
- Changes in membership (e.g., AMA)
- Other notifications (e.g., to your landlord, utility companies,

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pharmaceutical representatives, etc.)

- Disposal and/or distribution of office furniture and equipment
- Disposal of drug samples and other perishable/non-transferable items
- Communication with staff about how to tell patients about the practice closure

CPSA guidelines and policies can be found at www.cpsa.ab.ca.

For more information or advice on closing your practice or for assistance with other practice issues, please phone Kristin M. Olafson, Project Coordinator, PMP, at 1.866.830.1274, ext 207.

References

1. “The Request Process.” *Health Information Act*. Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Alberta. (www.oipc.ab.ca/pages/HIA/RequestProcess.aspx).
2. “Physicians’ Office Medical Records Policies.” *College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta Policy*. Revised August 2005. (www.cpsa.ab.ca/Libraries/Policies_and_Guidelines/Physicians_Office_Medical_Records.sflb.ashx).

The Alberta Medical Association Practice Management Program (PMP) provides high-quality business consulting services to Alberta physicians as they develop and implement Primary Care Networks. With offices in Calgary and Edmonton, the program serves physicians throughout the province. For more information about PMP services, please contact program staff at pmp@albertadoctors.org, 403.205.2089 or toll-free 1.866.830.1274 ■

