

How to Manage Abusive Patients

Overview

It's not uncommon for the Curi Risk Solutions team to occasionally get calls from practices who are dealing with an abusive patient. We've witnessed a growing trend in patients taking out their frustrations on physicians and practice staff with increased frequency in recent years. There are times when a patient, family member or caregiver may use abusive behavior such as threatening language, physical assault, or harassment against healthcare workers, staff, or even other patients visiting the practice, and to protect themselves, we recommend that practices enact a zero-tolerance policy against abusive behavior, starting with a comprehensive abusive patient policy.

Examples of topics to consider addressing/including in an abusive patient policy

- Determine when it's appropriate to call the police and/or 911
- Outline a standardized process for ending the physician-patient relationship, including:
 - Patient termination approval sent to the practice administrator and assigned provider
 - Formal termination letter sent to the patient, outlining the reason for termination and effective date
- Contemplate and plan for situations that might require expedited patient termination without standard delay/referral provisions
- Be clear regarding what is considered abusive behavior
- Outline a standardized process for dealing with abusive patient behavior
- Address whether/how the patient's chart will be flagged following an incident so no further appointments can be made at the practice
- Provide information on how physicians and staff members will be educated about the policy, and offer examples of abusive behavior to prevent misunderstandings
- Address how to educate patients about the policy and consider including the policy in the new patient packet
- Determine whether the policy or a summary of the policy will be posted in common areas, patient check-in areas, and patient treatment areas
- State that the policy will be enforced consistently

By the numbers

5x Healthcare workers are five times more likely to experience workplace violence than employees in all other industries*

38% of healthcare workers suffer physical violence at some point in their careers**

More information

To learn more about how to deal with abusive patients using a thoughtfully developed policy, please reach out to one of our risk solutions experts at Curi Advisory by calling 919.872.7117. You can also reach out to your state's medical board and medical society for more information on this topic.

The opinions, recommendations, and information provided herein are not intended as legal advice and are not intended to encompass every consideration you may give to dealing with developing policies/procedures related to this topic. We have found that the use of such information may reduce the risk of medical malpractice claims and/or undesired outcomes and we hope you find it useful, but we cannot guarantee that following this advice will prevent a claim against or negative outcome for you or your practice.

*Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics <https://www.bls.gov/iif/home.htm>

**Source: World Health Organization <https://www.who.int/activities/preventing-violence-against-health-workers>