

# Medicolegal File

## Lengthy prescription refills

Philip G. Winkelaar, CD, MD, CCFP

### QUESTION

Many of my patients want me to prescribe a year's supply of medications at a time, claiming they can get a better price or their insurance company prefers it. I have always prescribed medications only until the next time I want to see a patient. Should I continue this practice, or should I prescribe a year's supply and simply ask patients to visit me as often as I think they need to?

### ANSWER

To answer your question, it is important to address the vital issue of appropriately monitoring medications prescribed to ensure patients obtain the desired outcome. Because all medications have potential side effects, it makes no sense to keep giving a patient a medication that is not achieving the desired outcome or is causing adverse effects. Many drugs require monitoring to see that they maintain appropriate levels in the blood.

It is important for you to obtain patients' informed consent before prescribing medications. Patients should know the intended benefit and potential side effects of the drug, and any other factors that a

reasonable person in the patient's situation would want to know. Once patients have consented to take medications, you should also advise them how frequently you expect to see them for follow-up visits and why. You should explain the potential dangers of failing to make the follow-up visits. You should document all this in patients' records.

Despite your best efforts, some patients will not return when requested to do so, not even to have prescriptions refilled. If the potential harm to a patient from failing to return for a follow-up visit is reasonably serious, prudent practitioners might feel it is wise to contact the patient. To do this, of course, your office would need a means of identifying such patients. For that reason, many practitioners limit the duration of prescriptions so the time for refill coincides with the recommended frequency of follow-up visits.

In summary, the primary issue is not how much medication should be prescribed at a time, or how many refills should be authorized at a time, but rather whether patients are being monitored properly and advised in accordance with sound medical principles. ♣

Although laws governing medical practitioners are similar across the country, they can vary greatly from one jurisdiction to another. Specific answers to questions cannot be given in a national publication. While the information in this article is true in general, it is intended to bring issues to your attention, not to give specific advice. You should consult a lawyer if you have specific concerns. Members of the Canadian Medical Protective Association can contact the Association at 1-800-267-6522.

Readers may submit questions on medicolegal issues by fax to **Dr Philip Winkelaar** at (613) 725-1300. They will be considered for future Medicolegal Files.

.....  
**Dr Winkelaar, a Fellow of the College, is a Medical Officer at the Canadian Medical Protective Association in Ottawa, Ont.**