



Make Reasonably Careful Plans, Then Vacation

By TDIC Risk Management Staff

If a little rest and recreation is on your schedule, The Dentists Insurance Company wishes you bon voyage and offers a reminder to make "reasonably careful" arrangements for emergency patient care while you are out of the office.

TDIC recommends lining up emergency coverage with one or more of your colleagues, notifying patients at least one month before vacation and providing information about the dentists who will provide care in your absence. Inform patients of the colleagues' emergency contact information on your website and via a sign in your waiting room. If you are closing for vacation, leave a message on your telephone with emergency contact information. If you use an answering service, leave specific directions for the operator to collect information from the patient, including full name, date last seen, complaint and telephone number. Meet with colleagues in advance to discuss verification of patients of record and provide a referral list of specialists you routinely use to ensure continuity of care.

"There are circumstances, such as vacation, where dentists should have a policy or protocol regarding emergency or similar after-hours care," said John Sillis, a Northern California attorney specializing in professional liability. The key is whether the dentist is being "reasonably careful" to make sure patients are taken care of while he or she is out of the office.

Sillis said the phrase "reasonably careful" is in the definition of standard of care. A dentist can be negligent if he or she fails to use the level of skill, knowledge and care in diagnosis and treatment that other reasonably careful dentists would use in the same or similar circumstances.

"'Reasonably careful' is frequently defined as whether the dentist's action or omission caused the patient injury," Sillis added. "Develop a protocol to protect yourself and your patients while you are on vacation."

In addition to arranging for emergency patient care, schedule someone to check your mail for urgent or time-sensitive letters from patients, the Dental Board or an attorney.

Another option for vacation coverage is to hire a dentist to work in your practice while you are gone. If considering this option, TDIC recommends verifying the active license and insurance of the covering dentist. Make sure this dentist follows your protocol for charting entries and has the skill level you expect of someone who

is going to treat your patients. Carve out the time to discuss practice philosophies such as the dentist's availability to respond directly to patient concerns in the event of an emergency procedure, such as an extraction or root canal therapy. Again, provide a referral list of specialists. Meet with staff to plan for a smooth transition for the covering dentist and leave your contact information.

Vacation checklist:

If closing your practice for vacation:

- Arrange for emergency coverage with one or more colleagues.
- Notify patients one month in advance of vacation and provide emergency contact information.
- Leave emergency contact information on your website and answering machine.
- Develop a protocol for verification of patients of record.
- Provide a referral list of specialists.
- Schedule a daily mail check for urgent or time-sensitive matters.

If your office is open and another dentist is covering for you:

- Verify an active license and insurance of the covering dentist.
- Ensure the covering dentist's documentation and skill level meets your expectations.
- Discuss practice philosophies regarding emergency care and availability.
- Meet with staff to plan for a smooth transition.
- Leave your contact information.

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