

You Asked About...

Continuity of Care

You cannot treat and run! All Alberta dentists have an ethical responsibility to provide for continuity of care of their patients. This ethical responsibility applies to all dentists including dentists who “fly in” to treat patients in Alberta and then leave the location of treatment. Maintaining and ensuring continuity of care underscores the professional healthcare relationship between the dentist and patient.

The dentist’s ethical responsibility to provide for continuity of care of patients includes after hours availability to the patient and/or the dentist directly arranging for another professional to take over continuity of care of the patient with the other professional’s knowledge and permission. The patient must also be informed. This responsibility is outlined in Article A11 of the Alberta Dental Association and College Code of Ethics “that a dentist who has provided dental care, especially care that is of an extensive or invasive nature, has the obligation to provide direct availability for the patient to contact him or her “after hours.” This “on-call” or “after hours” obligation, if transferred to other professionals, must be done so with a formal agreement established through direct personal contact between the parties sharing this obligation. This transference must also be communicated to the patients receiving such care. Failure to do so breaches the dentist’s obligations to provide for continuity of care.” A breach of the Code of Ethics is considered unprofessional conduct, as defined in the Health Professions Act.

A dentist must have systems in place to ensure that all patients are cared for after hours. It is not enough for a dentist to tell a patient when they are finished with the dental treatment to “go to the emergency department of a hospital” to meet this ethical obligation. A dentist must take an active role in managing a patient’s care after the “completion” of their dental treatment. This role is more significant when the treatment is extensive and/or invasive. If a dentist leaves the province or the city after dental treatment is provided, the dentist continues to have this ethical responsibility and cannot just make himself or herself unavailable or unreachable.

All dentists in Alberta have a responsibility to contact the ADA+C when certain events happen. Article C3 of the Alberta Dental Association and College Code of Ethics outlines that “if a dentist has reasonable grounds to believe that another dentist has engaged in unprofessional conduct, including breach of the Code of Ethics then the dentist has an obligation to report this to the Complaints Director.”

The completion of dental treatment is up to the dentist who initiates the treatment whether they provide all of the “care” or not. It is not up to the patient to find a way to complete their “care.”