

TREATING STUDENTS AWAY AT COLLEGE: COULD YOU? SHOULD YOU?

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Summer is rapidly coming to an end and many of you have patients who will be heading off to college for the first time. What should you do about the patient who is leaving the area and asks that you continue treating her while she is away at school? On the one hand, it may seem like a very logical thing to do. You know this patient and she trusts you. You have been making excellent progress since you began treating her so why would you want to end the treatment relationship now? Because 1) it may not be legal to continue to treat, and 2) it may not really be in your patient's best interest.

Begin by talking to your patient (and if appropriate, your patient's family) about her needs and expectations for ongoing care. Will the patient be just a short distance away and able to come back for regular appointments or will she be in another state and unable to be seen in your office except during school holidays? Are you doing medication management only or are you also providing therapy to the patient? If the latter, how does the patient perceive this will be conducted?

Licensure and Other Legal Issues

If your patient is going to be attending school in another state, you will need to consider the issue of licensure. Remember, treatment is deemed to occur where the patient is physically located at the time of treatment. Once you have a clear idea of how you intend to manage your patient remotely, contact the licensing board in the state where your patient will be attending school and ask about the need for additional licensure. Each state varies a bit on this issue so whether you are required to have a local license may depend on expected frequency and the nature of your contact with the patient. Be as precise about your intended treatment as you can so that the individual you communicate with at the licensing board has a clear understanding of what you are planning to do. It's preferable that you communicate via email so that there is a written record of your conversation. If this isn't possible, and you are told that your proposed treatment is permissible without an additional license, make a note of the person with whom you spoke, the date, the time, and content of the conversation in case it's needed at a later date. Consider also contacting your own state board to verify you are not violating any of its rules.

In addition to ensuring that you are appropriately licensed, you will need to make certain that you are complying with the relevant laws and regulations of each state. There may be specific requirements related to remote treatment such as the need for an in-person exam before prescribing, type of equipment used, necessary additional documentation, etc. Before undertaking remote treatment, familiarize yourself with each state's requirements and determine whether you will be able to meet them.

Standard of Care

Assuming that licensure is not an issue – either because your patient is in-state or an additional license is not required, consider whether you will be able to meet the standard of care remotely. The standard of care for treating a patient at a distance is exactly the same as it would be were you seeing the patient in your office. Depending upon your mode of

communication, there are lost abilities that must be considered. For example, if you are communicating via telephone, you lose the abilities of sight and smell. Video-conferencing to some extent restores your ability to see the patient but you may miss things such as the development of a tremor or weight-loss. In all remote treatment, you will likely lose your “sixth sense” – the ability you’ve developed through the use of all your senses to just know something is wrong when you see a patient.

There are also practical issues to consider. For example, how would you assist the patient in a crisis? Do you know what emergency services are available at your patient’s location and how to contact them? What would you do if your patient had a reaction to a medication you prescribed? Would time differences make it difficult to communicate on a regular basis? Will your patient be able to find a private location to have a meaningful exchange?

College is an exciting time but it can also be stressful. Being away from home for the first time along with the stresses of trying to fit in socially and the pressure to succeed academically can trigger new mental health issues and intensify existing ones. Depending upon the nature of your patient’s illness and her level of stability, you may determine that what is truly in her best interest is to be connected to a local psychiatrist who can more immediately respond to her needs.

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