



*College of
Physicians and Surgeons
of Saskatchewan*

101 – 2174 Airport Drive
SASKATOON SK S7L 6M6

Business: (306) 244-7355
Fax: General (306) 244-0090
Fax: Dr. K. Shaw (306) 244-2600
Email: cpssinfo@cps.sk.ca
www.cps.sk.ca

REGISTRAR
KAREN SHAW, M.D.

Re: Physicians providing sick notes to patients during the COVID-19 pandemic

The College again wishes to thank all physicians for their unwavering commitment to patients during the COVID-19 pandemic, and for ensuring continuity of care despite these uncertain times.

We do however wish to bring to your attention that concerns have been raised to the College about physicians providing sick notes to patients, notably to healthcare workers (HCWs), indicating that they are unable to deliver any healthcare-related services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is our understanding that in some circumstances, patients are requesting a sick note to relieve them from any tasks related to the provision of any services based on presumed risk of contracting COVID-19. While the College does not intend to single out HCWs, based on the information provided to the College, this does disproportionately involve healthcare workers. However, the guidance that follows pertains equally to all patients who are involved in providing “essential services” during the pandemic.

The College understands that essential services workers, including physicians and other HCWs, are experiencing fear and anxiety at this uncertain time. This is to be expected. However, when faced with a patient requesting a sick note, it is important to refer back to the underlying expectations of physicians.

1. Expectations of physicians in providing sick notes

A sick note or “sick slip” should describe the condition the patient has and the effect that may have on the individual’s ability to perform the work duties of their employment. As stated in the College policy *Physician Certification of Work Absence or Accommodation due to Illness or Injury and Completion of Third Party Forms* (available at the following link

<http://www.cps.sk.ca/iMIS/Documents/Legislation/Policies/POLICY%20-%20Physician%20certification%20of%20work%20absence%20or%20accommodation.pdf>):

It is imperative that a physician is convinced of the facts around the illness, and conscientiously determines the appropriate period of work absence due to disability or the degree and duration of work accommodation required.

***To serve the public by regulating the practice of medicine
and guiding the profession to achieve the highest standards of care***

Issuing a Sick Slip is a very important matter. Stakeholders rely on a physician's expertise in determining what is right or fair. The same parties work under the assumption that a treating physician has had specific training in determining disability and work accommodation. This assumption is, in most circumstances inaccurate. Therefore it becomes incumbent on the physician to ensure the contents of the note or form are objective and formulated based on accurate assessment of patient reported complaints, and careful physical examination.

If an asymptomatic patient who is not on mandatory self-isolation attends on their physician seeking a sick note addressing their general ability to provide services during the pandemic, the College asks that physicians consider the limitations of their role in that circumstance. While there is evidence that certain underlying comorbidities can increase a patient's risk of experiencing a more serious disease progression, a physician is only expected to comment on *current* illness and its impact on the patient's ability to work.

If a physician chooses to comment on a patient's personal risk factors for severe illness (with patient consent), this can be provided as information to be considered by the patient's employer in assigning duties, but it is not a 'certification of illness' or a sick note.

Ethical guidance for patients who deliver "essential services", including healthcare workers, is available from their respective regulatory organizations.

2. Sick notes during the pandemic

The Saskatchewan government passed a sick leave bill effective retroactively to March 6, 2020. This new law, which applies to all workers during a declared public health emergency, removes the requirement to provide a sick note.

<https://leaderpost.com/news/saskatchewan/sask-passes-unpaid-sick-leave-bill-as-eighth-covid-19-case-declared/>

Of course, one of the underlying reasons for this legislation was to decrease the demand and risk for physicians who would be seeing patients requesting a sick note due to COVID-19 related illness.

These are uncertain times, and there are no hard and fast rules which we can apply. However, as always, the College relies on physicians to act ethically, and to apply their discretion and professional judgment when considering such requests.

Sincerely,



Dr. Werner Oberholzer

Deputy Registrar | Werner.oberholzer@cps.sk.ca | CPSS direct line: 1 306 667 4648

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