

A Doctor's Letter of Condolence

Such a letter used to be a standard part of a physician's role in caring for grieving family members after the death of a patient. If you don't already, consider starting to write such letters when a patient you care for dies.

Arguments for Writing a Letter of Condolence

- Help family, friends, and physician with grieving process
- Help family members manage the anger that may come from an unexpected or complicated death
- Help physician's own sense of failure or loss
- The absence of a letter may arouse a family's disappointment or suspicion

Excuses Given for Not Writing a Letter of Condolence

- Too busy
- Unable to obtain contact information for family
- Physician feels that he/she did not know patient well enough to write a genuine letter
- As part of a clinical team, it may not be clear which physician/care provider should write the letter
- Forces physician to deal with sense of failure
- Letters of condolence and other ways to help grieving family members are receive little attention in medical training

Suggestions for Writing a Letter of Condolence

- Avoid superficial statements such as, "I know how you feel."
- To avoid legal issues, focus on the sadness of the death and not on the clinical details
- Begin the letter with a direct expression of sorrow about the death such as, "I am writing to send you my condolences on the death of your husband."
- Try to include a personal memory of the patient and something about the family
- Consider including comments about the patient's courage during the illness and the comfort that the patient received from the family's love
- Conclude with a few words of support to let the family know that your thoughts are with them

Reference:

Bedell SE, Cadenhead K, Graboyes TB. The doctor's letter of condolence. NEJM. 2001; 344:1162-4.

Kane GC. A dying art? The doctor's letter of condolence. Chest. 2007;131:1245-7.

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Mr. and Mrs. X
2525 Road Rd
Anywhere, WA 88888

Dear Bill and Cathy,

It is with great sadness that I write to you on behalf of my entire medical team to send you our condolences on the death of your daughter, Julie. We were inspired by her concern for your well-being and her ability to make us all smile with her stories about camping. We also saw the comfort that she derived from your presence at her bedside. Please know that our thoughts are with you and the rest of Julie's family and friends during this difficult time.

Sincerely,

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