



## CNA HealthPro

### FAQs – Vacationing or Transient Patients

**Q.** Where I practice, dentists see a lot of “snow birds” – people who live up north most of the year but spend their winters here, where it’s warmer. It is very common for these individuals to call my office and say they “only want a cleaning,” and that their dentist back home will take care of the exam. Am I placing myself at a greater risk by allowing them to have prophys without insisting on exams?

**A.** Your concern is justified – it certainly is riskier to continue providing services for a patient whom you rarely or never examine.

Imagine that one of your snow bird patients develops a small lesion on the floor of the mouth shortly after her last visit to her dentist up north. At the time of her visit, your hygienist doesn’t recognize the lesion as something suspicious, and proceeds with the prophylaxis as requested by the patient. Since you didn’t perform an examination, the innocuous-looking raised red spot with irregular borders is left to grow.

The patient’s husband then takes ill shortly after her return home, further delaying her regularly scheduled dental visit. By the time she sees her home dentist, 16 months after her last exam, she now has a much larger, more invasive lesion than when she presented for care in your office.

It wouldn’t be a surprise if she asserted that you or someone who works under your supervision and control (in this case, your hygienist) failed to diagnose her oral cancer or even alert her to the presence of a suspicious lesion. After all, her last dental care visit prior to her diagnosis took place at your office.

You can minimize the chance of such an allegation by instituting an office policy that requires patients to have an examination whenever you deem it professionally appropriate, such as in conjunction with a routine prophylaxis. It is *your* practice – you get to make the rules.

If a patient of record refuses to follow your protocol, you may dismiss that person from your practice for noncompliance with your treatment recommendations, being sure to follow proper patient termination procedures. New patients should be informed of your policy – and the clinical rationale for the policy – either before or during their first visit to your practice.

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