



Hospital Visits and Safeguarding Confidential Information

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Most people value their personal privacy. And most people also prefer to have their personal business kept private. Financial affairs, relationship issues, and health matters are regarded by most people as subjects that are kept private, unless they choose to share that information with someone they trust. And even then, there is an expectation that the information will be held in strictest confidence.

However, when a person enters a hospital, no matter who it is, knowledge of that seems to spread rapidly with little or no regard for the wishes of the patient. Within minutes, details of the person's condition can spread throughout an organization, the United States, and even around the world. We should realize that not every hospitalized person wants that information known. And, unless given permission, we should not disseminate indiscriminately.

It is important for us to realize that not everyone wants information about their hospitalization known or shared with others. In fact, a patient, if he/she so desires, has the right to be in the hospital anonymously. And every hospital has policies in place to protect the privacy rights of those being admitted. If such a request has been made by a person when being admitted to a hospital, the hospital must honor and respect the rights and wishes of the patient. In such cases, the patient's presence or room number may not be divulged to others by hospital staff.

All of us should keep in mind that the patient should be the one who determines what information is shared, how it is shared, and with whom.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when someone you know becomes hospitalized.

1. Ask before visiting. While many people appreciate visits, not everyone does. Call ahead to find out if your friend can have visitors, feels well enough to see you, or wants to have you visit them.
2. Don't stay too long. Patients typically get very little rest when hospitalized. They are being woken up by staff throughout the day and night for vital sign checks, medications, and for other procedures. Remember, it's the fact that you have taken the time to visit, and not the length of time you stay, that gives your patient the boost.
3. Leave the room if a doctor, nurse, or other health care provider arrives to examine or talk to the patient. Unless you are a parent, spouse, or someone else who is an official advocate for the patient, that conversation is not your business. You can return once the provider leaves.
4. Safeguard confidential information. ANY health-related information regarding a patient, whether given to you directly by the patient or a staff member, or information gleaned indirectly through what you may observe or overhear, must be held in strict confidentiality. The only use you may make of that information is in determining how to best minister to the patient. Upon leaving the hospital, all of that information must remain confidential and should not be shared with others. *You should never assume that you may share any information with fellow comrades, church or synagogue members, for the purposes of keeping them updated or for prayer support, unless you have the direct, specific permission of the patient.*

For quite some time now, the use and release of a patient's personal health information has been governed by HIPAA (Health Information Portability and Accountability Act, 2003) legislation and regulations. Chaplains are often the link between the patient and the Post. We should keep HIPAA regulations in mind and continue to maintain our comrade's privacy and confidentiality. Please get your VFW or Auxiliary member's permission before sharing information about their hospitalization. Ask the person what he/she wants you to share with other Post members.

Blessings as you serve.

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