



CMA WEEKLY ALERT – SEPTEMBER 8, 2005

MAINTAINING DIGNITY: ADVOCACY TIPS FOR INSTITUTIONS AND PATIENTS

Patient dignity is a central, sometimes overlooked, facet of health care quality in hospitals and other institutions. Dignified care involves several aspects, the underlying theme of which is respectful, open communication between patients and providers. Patients should feel respected and involved in the decisions made about their health at all times. A lack of communication between providers and patients can cause patients to feel intimidated, confused about their plan of care, and entirely removed from the decision making process. What follows are some suggestions that advocates, institutions and patients can use to facilitate communication and promote patient dignity.

ADVOCATES AND INSTITUTIONS

- Advocates may wish to work with local hospitals to implement a system-wide protocol for staff interaction with patients. The protocol might include some simple but meaningful steps that providers can take to promote dignity:
 - Knock before entering a patient's room and ask permission to enter;
 - Give your name verbally and have it visibly displayed on your jacket in readable type;
 - Before any procedure, ask for the patient's consent. Explain what the procedure is, why you are performing it, and how it will feel.
 - Inform patients any time their care plan is altered and explain the reasons behind the changes.
- Hospitals should have an appropriate redress mechanism to document patient grievances regarding inappropriate behavior from staff. This may involve a wider effort to document patient satisfaction, an aspect Medicare should incorporate into its conditions for reimbursement or its certification requirements. Such grievance procedures should include:
 - The provision of information to patients about their right to report a grievance, including how to initiate the process;
 - The ability to initiate a grievance without feeling intimidated or disparaged by facility staff;
 - The ability to have the grievance recorded in the patient record by someone other than the staff member in question;
 - The serious review of complaints by institution administrators, with the goal of amending or implementing protocols to improve patient satisfaction and dignity.

PATIENTS

- Ask questions. It is okay to ask the doctor to repeat or explain information that is not clear. Ask the doctor to write instructions if you feel they are complicated or that you will forget them. The instructions should be *legible* and make sense *to you*.
- When possible, have a trusted family member or friend with you at all times who is willing to speak up and ask questions on your behalf.
- Ask to see physician orders for procedures being carried out by other staff. This duplicate process can make you feel more in control, and forces staff to review orders, which can reduce medical errors.
- Ask staff to explain the procedures they are performing, why they are performing them, how it will feel, and how long it will take.

These few steps can make a significant difference in a patient's health care experience. Patient-provider communication is crucial at every step of the process, from entry into a facility to discharge, and through recovery. Some of the steps outlined will not only improve patient dignity, but will also help assure patient safety.

RESOURCE TIPS

For more information about what patients can do to facilitate communication with their providers and improve their safety while at the hospital and during their recovery, see the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations' (JCAHO) Speak Up™ campaign (link "Speak Up" to <http://www.jcaho.org/general+public/gp+speak+up/>). Medicare is also working to improve patient dignity and safety through their Medicare Health Support pilot project, which provides chronically ill patients with health coaches help them manage their condition and keep up communication and coordination with their providers. More information is available at <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/medicarereform/ccip/overview.asp>. The project is described in the August 8, 2005 Associated Press article entitled "Health Coaches to Aid Medicare Patients".

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