

# Confidentiality as a Medical Student: A Gentle Reminder.

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It is said that confidentiality is the cornerstone of the patient-physician relationship. It is a promise rooted in tradition, law and medical ethics (1). Almost from the first day of medical school, students are educated about the vital importance of confidentiality. We are told that respecting a patient's right to privacy and confidentiality is essential. We are also told about the conversations heard daily in hospital elevators and cafeterias where health professionals almost unthinkingly discuss details of patient care for all to hear. Most medical students genuinely gasp in disbelief at this blatant breach of confidentiality. Still believing in the perfect world, we make a silent vow to ourselves that we will ensure confidentiality for all patients. Most, if not all, of us do quite well in protecting our patients' right to privacy and would never intentionally violate this trust.

Patients must be able to trust their caregivers completely or essential information may be intentionally withheld, which may have an affect on their health care (2). I believe that the majority of patients feel that information shared with physicians and soon-to-be physicians will be kept in confidence and would not be disclosed to a third party without their consent. Patients are usually safe to assume this.

But what about when the patient is a colleague or a family member of a colleague? Do the same rules of confidentiality apply or are we allowed to bend the rules slightly? My understanding is that respecting the concept of confidentiality should be uniform regardless of who the

patient is. An obvious statement, right? Well, it may be a straightforward notion but I think it is one of which we all need a little reminding every so often.

As medical students, we have the opportunity to meet a variety of wonderful people throughout our training. I am starting to learn that there may potentially be a downside to knowing many people involved in the health professions. What happens when a health professional requires medical attention or needs a medical procedure done at a local facility where he/she knows hee/she will encounter many familiar faces? Perhaps many would not be bothered by this situation and would only be too happy to further assist in the education of the students. However, for some, this can pose a potentially embarrassing situation.

Illness is a private matter. Inevitably, we know that the details will be known to the staff and those directly involved in our care. But what about others not involved? The pause in the conversation during morning coffee break is often the ideal time to casually mention to your colleagues that you saw "Joe" in the OR the other day. Is this a breach of confidentiality? In theory, most would say "yes".

Too often around the hospital, conversations similar to this are heard. There is no malice intended since, besides being a bit nosey, most people are genuinely concerned about the welfare of others. Ubel *et al.* (3) determined the type and frequency of inappropriate comments made by hospital employees in hospital elevators. They overheard inappropriate comments on 13.9% of elevator trips they took. Forty-six per cent of these comments were violations of patient confidentiality.

It has become quite apparent to me early in my medical career the diffic-

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ulties doctors and medical students have in preserving confidentiality for their own or a family member's medical conditions. On a personal note, I have noticed some, albeit more subtle, confidentiality issues with respect to the health care of my son. On one occasion, my family doctor referred my son to a specialist for a consult. It did not surprise me that the specialist mentioned that she had a medical student doing an elective with her. The student happened not to be with her that day but asked me if I knew the student. I did. I expected that this visit would be kept confidential but was surprised the next time I ran into my colleague who told me that Dr. "X" mentioned our visit and that Dr. "X" thought our son was very cute. I appreciated the compliment on my son's appearance but was not sure how necessary it was for the physician to disclose this information. Certainly, no harm was done but our right to privacy and confidentiality was neglected.

Another episode occurred when my son had to undergo a minor procedure at the I.W.K. Children's Hospital. The staff person had a medical student working with him that particular day. My wife and I did not mind in the least that the student be involved in our son's care. When I saw my colleague again several days later, the student asked (in a most sincere and caring voice) how my son was doing. We joked that the staff person did all the work and that the student did not do anything. This was a kind gesture of concern but the problem was that several other classmates were standing right beside us. Naturally, people were later inquiring about my son's operation. No mention, in either circumstance, was made to the people involved that we would prefer to keep our visits confidential. Should this be specified? Again, this individual certainly meant no harm and did no harm but our right to privacy and confidentiality was unintentionally overlooked.

I have come to quickly realize that the concept of confidentiality is much more difficult to understand than first realized. The Oath of Hippocrates says in part that "I will not divulge anything that, in connection with my profession or otherwise, I may see or hear of the lives of men which should not be revealed, on the belief that all such things should be kept secret." (2) In 1983, the International Code of Medical Ethics said that "a doctor owes to his patient absolute secrecy on all which has been confided in him or which he knows because of confidences entrusted to him." (2)

Although we are not doctors and have not yet taken the Hippocratic Oath, we do have moral and ethical obligations of confidentiality to our patients. Besides being sleep-deprived, medical students (and other health professionals) are human. Few things are more tempting to most people than to reveal or share a secret with another. What we all must do is try to resist this temptation. It is not easy, especially if the patient is a colleague or a family member of a colleague, but it is absolutely necessary. If a patient, especially a colleague,

had even the slightest reason to believe that his/her secrets are not safe with you, they will not be as willing to reveal them or have you participate in their care. Patient care will suffer and so will student education. As medical students, we have the opportunity of understanding early on, that confidentiality must be respected and guarded for all patients. Our patients will respect us more and so will our colleagues.

## REFERENCES

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