

5-1-1953

Letters for Medical Staff, Mercy Hospital, Oshkosh, Wisconsin

Catholic Physicians' Guilds

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Catholic Physicians' Guilds (1953) "Letters for Medical Staff, Mercy Hospital, Oshkosh, Wisconsin," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 20 : No. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq/vol20/iss2/7>

The following letters were prepared for the Medical Staff of Mercy Hospital, Oshkosh, Wisconsin by the Chaplain and the Moral Ethics Committee in the interest of Catholic patients in danger of death. The editors of LINACRE QUARTERLY publish these for their excellence as reminder of an important directive of the ethical code enforced in many of our hospitals.

To the Medical Staff of Mercy Hospital:

The Moral Ethics Committee of the hospital has deemed it necessary to promulgate anew one of the ethical directives of the hospital code in force here. It is this:

"Everyone has the right and the duty to prepare for the solemn moment of death. Unless it is clear, therefore, that a dying patient is already well prepared for death, as regards both temporal and spiritual affairs, it is the physician's duty to inform, or to have some responsible person inform, him of his critical condition."

The hospital code requires that the physician inform the patient either directly or indirectly. The physician, therefore, does not fulfill his obligation by informing the patient's family, unless he is certain that the family will inform the patient. The obligation is to the patient, not to the family.

The hospital code does not require that the patient be informed as soon as his critical condition is discovered, nor does it require that the patient be told the cause of his critical condition. The code merely requires that the patient be told about his critical condition, in sufficient time to prepare for death as regards both his temporal and his spiritual affairs.

The doctor, of course, will be tactful in informing his patient. There is no need for a blunt revelation of his condition. [If the patient is a calm, matter-of-fact, solidly religious person who accepts life and its sorrows with courage and resignation, and he asks what the probabilities of life are for him and how much time he may expect, he might be told with profit. If the patient is unstable, subject to moods that master him to his own detriment, perhaps it will be best to tell him in time to straighten out both spiritual and temporal affairs, but not before, unless he seriously insists upon knowing and claims his right to know. If there is any question whatever of the outcome of the disease, answering queries of impending death by admitting the probability, but showing the possibility of recovery, may buoy the patient's spirit and help him to conquer the onslaughts of his illness.*] Whatever the case, when the proper time comes, the doctor should leave no doubt in the patient's mind that there is danger of death and approximately how great the danger is.

Neglect in observing this part of the code will be considered as serious as neglect in observing the medical directives of the code.

Should the family or relatives sternly object, the doctor can tell them that the moral law and the hospital code require him to inform the patient of his critical condition, and thus divert their anger from him.

We ask your full cooperation in this matter.

Sincerely yours, (Signed)

VERNON G. GUENTHER, M.D.

MARCELLUS C. HAINES, M.D.

RAY F. WAGNER, M.D.

EARL B. WILLIAMS, M.D.

REV. DENNIS A. WORZALLA, Chairman

* cf. *Handmaid of the Divine Physician*, by Sister Mary Berenice, O.S.F., R.N., Ph.D., Bruce Publishing Co., 1952, p. 12.

MERCY HOSPITAL

The Chaplain's Postscript:

This letter gives me the opportunity to seek your cooperation in another matter. As the chaplain in a Catholic hospital, one of my chief duties is to administer the last rites of the Catholic Church (Confession, Communion, Last Anointing or Extreme Unction, and the Apostolic Blessing) to dying Catholics. Since I lack medical knowledge and medical acquaintance with the Catholic patients, it is impossible for me to fulfill my duty without the cooperation of the hospital staff.

Heretofore I have had to rely almost entirely on the sisters and the nurses on the floor for notification that a Catholic was in danger of death. They have been very faithful in fulfilling this duty. But they are not always sufficiently aware of the patient's condition, especially as regards new admissions; and as a result there were some "close calls," and more than once the Catholic patient was too far gone to be able to receive all of the last rites.

And so I ask you, too, to cooperate with me that I may fulfill this duty more perfectly. When a Catholic is in danger of death, please notify me, or have the nurse on the floor notify me that I may give him the last rites while he is fully conscious. When there is immediate danger of death, be sure not to administer drugs that will take away the patient's consciousness until after he has confessed his sins, received Holy Communion, and the Last Anointing (Extreme Unction).

Catholics regard the last sacraments as extremely important and beneficial. Very many pray regularly all through their lives that God might allow them to receive the last sacraments before they die. Catholics who receive the last sacraments feel prepared for death. Catholic relatives breathe a sigh of relief and thanksgiving when they hear that the patient received the last sacraments before he died. The last rites bring a certain peace to all involved.

Here is the reason why: Catholics believe that a good confession will take away all the sins for which the penitent is sorry. Moreover, Extreme Unction will give him all the grace he needs to face death courageously and to conquer any temptations that may arise before death. It is also the belief of Catholics that Extreme Unction will take away at the moment of death all the sins that its recipient committed between the time of his last confession and the time of his death, and will cancel out completely his debt of temporal punishment provided he is sorry for all of his sins at least because he fears God's just punishments. In short, Extreme Unction prepares him for immediate entrance into heaven, should death be God's will. Finally, Catholics believe that Extreme Unction has the God-given power to heal the body in some cases. Catholics, therefore, very often have greater hope of recovery because they believe God may cure them through the sacrament of Extreme Unction. Catholics rely on a text from St. James' Epistle for some of this doctrine: "Is any man sick among you? Let him call in the priests of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and if he be in sins they shall be forgiven him" (5:14).

In view of these Catholic beliefs, I think you will agree that your Catholic patients who are dangerously ill will appreciate as much as I, myself, your cooperation in bringing to them the last rites.

Thanks in advance. May God bless you.

Sincerely yours,

DENNIS A. WORZALLA