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## How important is patient privacy? A reflection

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## MEDICAL ETHICS

## HOW IMPORTANT IS PATIENT PRIVACY? A REFLECTION

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## ABSTRACT

Privacy is a basic human right; however, a patient's right to privacy is often violated because health care providers do not fulfill their ethical and professional responsibilities. There is an immediate need to preserve patients' privacy by health care professionals; a standardized policy on patients' privacy is important. This paper aims to analyze the significance of patients' privacy in health care. A case scenario of a pregnant woman from an antenatal setting has been integrated to support the concept of privacy in promoting and advocating patients' right.

**Key Words:** Privacy, Patient's right.

## INTRODUCTION

Human beings always require respect, care, and dignity from other human beings. Health care professionals are accountable to show respect, value the individual, and to protect the dignity and privacy of patients. The need for privacy is a basic human right. The right to privacy is based on two principles. The first is human dignity; the second, respect for individual freedom.<sup>1</sup> Privacy provides an individual with a boundary between self and others, allowing the patient to limit and control the information that is presented publically and to select others.<sup>2</sup>

Nurses are obliged to provide privacy and ethical care to patients. Privacy is complex and can be analyzed from various dimensions. Researchers have identified physical, social, psychological, and informational dimensions. The physical dimension of privacy is related to the concept of personal space and territory. Space describes an area and a protection zone that separates one person from another's territory and is a combination of the physical space and the behavior of human beings, and gives people the opportunity to be alone. A space for physical privacy includes physical touch and understanding.<sup>3</sup> Gynecological examinations are particularly intimate, and according to the Royal Collage of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, intimate

examinations should be conducted in a private room. Women should be allowed to undress privately, and the examination should be justifiable.<sup>4</sup>

According to a research study on privacy, elderly patients verbalized their feeling that younger patients receive more respect and care than old patients. They also reported that they felt embarrassed and degraded when they are not treated with dignity, especially when a health care provider exposes the patient's body parts during any procedure.<sup>5</sup>

Privacy should be maintained at all times for patients of either gender; it should be part of nursing duty. Due to the lack of resources such as staff and curtains, privacy has been compromised in hospital setting.<sup>6</sup> Maintaining the privacy of the patient who is undergoing physical examination helps the patient to feel comfortable, making it easier for him/her to share feelings and provide proper information. Before explaining information, it is important to make the patient comfortable and to afford him/her privacy. Invasion of personal space raises an individual's anxiety level and can provoke aggressive or violent behavior.<sup>7</sup> Each year the General Medical Council in the UK receives complaints from patients who feel that health care providers have behaved improperly during an intimate examination.<sup>8</sup>

## CASE

In the setting of a maternity home, the woman in labor may not be capable of requesting privacy and dignified treatment because she is in pain and anxious. In an outpatient setting of an obstetrics and gynecology department, a pregnant female who was 24 years old, fourth gravid, Para 3+0 and 36 weeks of gestation came for a routine antenatal checkup.

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A health care professional came to examine her and removed her shirt over the abdomen without informing her. She asked the patient to loosen her trousers without maintaining privacy and performed physical examinations such as fetal position, measuring the height of the fundus, listened to fetal heart sound, and vaginal examination. At the same time, the doctor was taking the history from the patient. The patient's lower perineal area was exposed and she was trying to pull up her trousers by herself. The patient's facial expressions exhibited higher level of discomfort and anxiety. Although a nurse drew the curtain and put the top sheet over the patient, it was already too late. Questions of privacy have received only marginal attention in research on postnatal care, midwifery practice and maternity care.<sup>8</sup>

### ANALYSIS

On reflection of this incident, we were disappointed and sensed the lack of a caring attitude and sympathy by a health care professional for this patient. The health care professional is not only accountable for medical treatment but is responsible for the client's psychological care, sense of privacy, and moral support. In this situation, the professional should place his/her self in the place of the patient.

One could raise a number of questions bases on this scenario: do health care professional really believe in holistic care? What is their role? Why were ethical principles not taken seriously? Was this provider following hospital policy regarding patients' privacy? Indeed, this is the basic principle of nursing care and medical treatment that should be followed by physicians, nurses, and other paramedic staff members. According to the Pakistan Nursing Council 2000, each registered nurse protects and promotes the interests of the individual client, recognizes and respects the uniqueness and dignity of each client, and responds in fairness to her/his need for care.

In this situation, the patient's right to privacy was violated because the health care providers did not fulfill ethical and professional responsibilities. Physical exposure related to personal care violated the patient's privacy. In the opinion of the authors, this is most frequently encountered our setting, especially in the developing countries.

### RECOMMENDATION

This study has shown that each healthcare professional must be assertive and preserve the patient's privacy and dignity as a priority in providing holistic care. Assertiveness is an indispensable tool for the nurse, enabling her to successfully act as the patient's advocate to safeguard patient privacy. Without such skills, it would be difficult to protect and guard the interests of the patient.<sup>10,11</sup>

A standardized policy to protect the privacy of patients is needed. Moreover, the concept of the patients' right to privacy should also be emphasized in medical colleges and nursing curricula. The administration should play an important role by informing the patient about the right to privacy at the time of admission. Copies of patients' rights should be posted throughout the organization. The Joint Commission International Accreditation (JCIA) also emphasized that the management staff should do frequent audits of the staff regarding the preservation of patients' privacy.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, nurses must be a role model for our patients and other health workers. We should respect the patients' rights to privacy and dignity and integrate ethical principles in clinical practice in order to provide holistic care to patients.

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