

Understanding the Importance of Patient Privacy



Reading time:
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Two hospital registrar colleagues often confer with each other regarding their patients. One day, they met in the lift and discussed the details of one of the patients. The conversation went as follows:

Dr V: "Have you seen Mrs X's foot?"

Dr D: "Yes, isn't it gross?"

Dr V: "It's hard to imagine how anyone could have such horrendous ulceration – they're going to have to chop it off."

Dr D: "I know – it's just so revolting... poor old thing – still – I guess the fact that she has dementia will probably help... she probably won't remember a thing about it! Ha ha!"

There was another person in the lift with them that day – Mrs X's husband. He was furious that such a casual and disrespectful conversation had occurred and reported the practitioners to hospital management. The report included a complaint about "confidential and personal medical information apparently being available to people who had no understanding or respect for patients and their privacy."

After contacting MIPS

MIPS assisted Dr V and Dr P in articulating a written explanation with full disclosure and apology to the hospital and a commitment to undertake further targeted education. They also provided a written apology for the patient's family.

MIPS reminded the doctors about the laws and regulatory requirement in respect of privacy and confidentiality about an individual's healthcare.

Key messages

- The Medical and Dental Board Code of Conduct is clear about patient privacy and confidentiality. They state: Patients have a right to expect that practitioners and hospital staff will hold information about them in confidence.
- Health practitioners need to treat information about patients as confidential. A breach of confidentiality can lead to hospital or Medical /Dental Board punitive action. Unfortunately, this does occur, and in serious case, practitioners' employment has been terminated and registration suspended for breach of privacy.
- Read your code of conduct and hospital /practice policy on privacy and confidentiality.

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