

Inside Medicine: Hypocrisy pierces thin curtain of privacy

By Dr. Michael Wilkes -

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It was the end of the day when I stopped by Mrs. J's room to see how she was feeling. I sat in the comfortable chair next to her bed on the "A" side of the room and pulled out some reports so I could summarize the results of the hospital tests we had conducted.

Before I could begin our conversation, I could not help but overhear the doctor and patient on the "B" side of the curtain. They were discussing the patient's sexual life, her history of depression, her marital difficulties and the prognosis of her cancer.

Mrs. J closed her eyes, gave me a glance of resignation and then rolled her eyes.

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While Mrs. J and her neighbor both needed to be in the hospital, neither had agreed that their illness, their personal lives or their naked bodies would be fully disclosed to the other. I am not sure when medical providers decided to engage in the type of magical thinking that allows us to pretend that the pea-green curtain that starts 2 feet off the floor and ends 2 feet from the ceiling provides any sort of privacy. We all pretend that once that curtain is pulled, the space becomes a soundproof room.

Before performing a physical exam, the doctor on the "B" side pulled the curtain to assure that passers-by in the hallway could not see in. However, in pulling the curtain -- which was probably 4 feet too short -- the doctor pulled the curtain away from Mrs. J's side of the bed, so we both had an unobstructed view of the naked patient and her doctor.

This same lack of privacy occurs regularly in hospital emergency rooms, chemotherapy centers, pediatric urgent-care clinics and even blood-drawing areas. "Mr. X, your doctor has ordered blood work for HIV, hepatitis C and syphilis. If it's OK with you, I'll go ahead and draw the blood now." At that precise moment, the staff and the other six patients in the blood-drawing room all know too much about this person's health.

I wonder how often patients who have not bought in to this magical thinking of privacy decline to give us accurate answers to our questions out of concerns about confidentiality. Would you tell your doctor that you had used ecstasy, that your husband beat you or that you had severe vaginal bleeding if you knew that patients on either side of you could hear?

Doctors and nurses forget how much the patient is asked to risk by being honest with their answers to our questions. I often can nearly see the cogs turning when I ask a person a question that touches on a sensitive issue: "Is it riskier to tell the doctor and divulge a secret or just answer that everything is fine?"

As we joked about the lack of privacy, Mrs. J told me of another patient who had occupied the next bed earlier in the week, until she had a cardiac arrest and died. Mrs. J reported being extremely distraught at the loss of her roommate and all the commotion common in these types of resuscitations. When she asked the nurse about the events, she was told that medical information about all patients is confidential.

While health-care providers all understand the importance of confidentiality, and almost all place a high value on maintaining it, our health-care systems are just not designed to be private places.

About the writer:

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