

Privacy of Your Medical Information

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By now we have all heard of HIPPA, but may not really understand what it is or what it means. HIPPA stands for Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. It was designed to provide privacy standards to protect your medical records, improve the quality of health care by restoring trust in the system and improving efficiency and effectiveness by creating a set of standards for protecting your personal health information. HIPPA took effect 6 years ago on April 14, 2003 and now allows you access to your medical records and more control over how your personal health information is used and disclosed. HIPPA has affected everyone and there are implications at our congregation also.

As an individual deals with illness or injury, recovers from surgery or faces a difficult prognosis, medical professionals, health care facility chaplains and visiting pastoral care, friends and family all play an important role in God's work of healing. These new privacy regulations demand more intentional communication to make this happen. Prior to HIPPA members of the clergy were often given a fair amount of informal information about patients in hospitals or other health care facilities. Now every facility has privacy rules, but they differ on how they are implementing the HIPPA regulations. If the patient or resident does not object, most health care facilities will list the patient name in the facility directory. HIPPA regulations generally allow pastors to receive limited information based on this directory, including the location and general health of the individual. For additional information, a signed authorization must be filled out or the patient must share the information directly with the pastor. Some facilities use an identification system or code for people to get more information. This code is given to the patient or their family member. The family member or pastor provides this code to the health care staff when asking about the patient's condition or any treatments. There is an assumption that if someone has the proper code, the patient has provided the code to the person and has given permission for their health information to be shared.

Providing education to our congregation about HIPPA and the need to reach out to connect the church with those who need pastoral care can help to make communication a shared responsibility. Sometimes members believe that the church will intuitively know when they are hospitalized or admitted to a health care facility. Since this is not true, patients must take a more active role in ensuring that their church can find them after admission. The absolute best way to do this is to make sure that someone-you or a family member or friend-calls the church to let them know of your admission. You will more than likely talk to Carol Jefferson and the more information that you provide directly to her the more readily pastoral care can be provided. Many facilities will have you fill out a form upon admission that asks for your religious affiliation and for the name of your church. Again, this is no guarantee that we will hear of your admission or be aware of your needs for pastoral care. It must be reiterated that a phone call is the single most effective way to connect our church to our members in health care settings.

There has been some question as to whether it is a HIPPA violation to offer prayers for members in the hospital. Whether naming someone in intercessory prayers is a HIPPA violation depends on how the information was obtained and how it was shared. If an employee of the hospital learns of a hospitalization during work and then shares this information with the pastor or a member of our church,

the employee has violated HIPPA. However, if a pastor visits a member in a nursing home and adds that individual to the prayers, there has been no violation. It is always important to use good judgment in limiting the information that is shared in the prayer. We have decided it is best practice for Carol Jefferson to have the patient's permission for the sharing and the family's permission if the patient is unable to provide permission.

Being aware of the regulations and working to be your own advocate will help to improve the timeliness of pastoral care while also reducing the frustrations of church staff, patients and health care staff. HIPPA was not put in place to be a barrier, but was designed to protect your highly confidential and personal information. If we all work together to understand the positive purpose of HIPPA, know the expectations of health care facilities and use effective methods of communication amongst everyone involved, then there will be a greater chance for timely pastoral care during difficult times of life when our members need health care services.

When words abound, transgression is inevitable, but the one who restrains his words is wise.

Prov 10:19