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authorities if, for example, he or she encounters an unfit patient who continues to drive against medical advice or when the patient is exposing others to risk of illness.

Doctors are also bound by certain statutory duties to disclose information ie, to give notification of a communicable disease (eg, AIDS) or of a person's dependence on certain controlled drugs. A court order for disclosure of medical information also supersedes the need for the patient's authorization. As for the disclosure of patient information used for medical teaching, research and audit, consent is not required if the data have been effectively anonymized.

'Oh no, my secret's out!'

Despite the ethical and legal obligations of doctors to keep their patients' confidences, it still remains an impossible feat for patient information to be kept completely confidential. Healthcare delivery routinely involves the dissemination of medical records through shared databases. It is, therefore, essential for doctors to be aware of areas where there is potential risk for breaching patient confidentiality and take steps to minimize those risks. Practitioners should always take notice of their surroundings when releasing information about a patient in their clinics or hospitals.

Practical tips

Discussions with patients about their medical condition should never be conducted in open areas of the clinical facility such as the waiting area. Where possible, limit the need to mention identifiable patient information such as names, tests or treatment details at the reception desk. When discussing a patient with other healthcare professionals, it is important to avoid doing so in public places.

Always remember to keep the privacy of telephone discussions in which patient details are released, especially when the call is taken by the doctor during a consultation with another patient. It is recommended that the doctor take telephone calls in another room. Doctors should also implement a security check of the identity of a caller who requests for test results or sensitive data to be communicated to them via the telephone, for example, by asking for their mother's name.

In relation to medical records, doctors should keep all patient information out of view and accessible to unauthorized persons. One method is to arrange the position of computer screens and fax machines so that patient data is only visible to the doctor or other medical personnel. The appointment book or list should always be kept confidential and not left open or unattended.

As for the transfer of patient information, practitioners should ideally include a cover sheet with a confidentiality note when faxing

sensitive material. When obliging a request for medical records, any release of those records should also attempt to protect patient confidentiality as much as possible and advocate general safeguards in

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ways be accompanied by a copy of the patient's release form to evidence authorization.

Conclusion

Maintaining patient confidentiality is a key component in the provision of medical treatment. Doctors

should attempt to protect patient confidentiality as much as possible and advocate general safeguards in their practice to ensure that the rest of the healthcare team observe the same standard of responsible information management. **MI**

Reference: www.medicineau.net.au

* Article courtesy of Raja, Darryl and Loh.



Doctors must maintain confidentiality of patients unless patients have agreed to have their details shared.

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