

Here's bill of rights for hospital patients

Do you know your rights as a patient in a hospital or a doctor's office?
 And are you aware of your responsibilities to the physicians, nurses and others who provide you with medical care?
 Despite efforts of the American Hospital Association, the Federation of American Hospitals, individual hospitals, government organizations, consumer groups and insurance companies, a large number of people apparently are still not sure of what they have a right to expect and what in turn is expected of them when medical treatment is necessary.
 The Department of Health, Safety and Research of the Combined Insurance Co. of America notes that the "Patient's Bill of Rights" adopted by the American Hospital Association has been incorporated into the by-laws and other regulations of some hospitals. But the question was raised as to how many patients actually see what these rules provide.

"WHEN A patient is admitted, is he or she handed a copy of the Patient's Bill of Rights?" A Combined Insurance researcher asked. "Our information indicates that in many cases this is not done, with the result that there are patients who do not know what their rights — if any — are."

The American Medical Association limits its involvement in patient rights to its policy "to encourage physicians to encourage their patients to discuss treatment and fees."

A number of insurance companies urge policyholders to become aware of their rights and obligations not only as patients but also as policyholders. More and more companies are providing payments for second medical opinions on whether surgery is really necessary. They are encouraging patients to ask questions about their treatment as well as their bills, which have been rising sharply.

CONSUMER groups are suggesting that patients ask their doctors about proposed surgery — its benefits, risks and potential results, along with possible alternatives to an operation. They are also advising patients to make sure that their surgeons are certified in the specialty involved and that they enter hospitals that are fully accredited and have reputations for good care and qualified staffs.

In presenting its Patient's Bill of Rights, the House of Delegates of the American Hospital Association expressed the hope that observance of the provisions would contribute to more effective patient care and greater satisfaction for patients, doctors and hospitals.

The Bill of Rights holds that a patient can expect "considerate and respectful care." It adds the right to information, including complete details about diagnosis, treatment and prognosis to enable a patient to give "informed" consent to the start of any procedure or treatment.

The patient is offered the further right to details of the specific procedure prescribed, including the risks and probable duration of incapacitation. Information about possible alternatives are also prescribed by the hospital association.

In all cases involving the provision of information to patients, the association's Bill of Rights sets forth the possible ability that emergency procedures might be necessary without obtaining permission from the patient. It also presents the possibility that a relative or another person representing the patient may be given the necessary information under certain conditions.

The Bill of Rights gives a patient the opportunity to refuse treatment to the extent permitted by law and also calls for every possible consideration of his privacy.

PATIENTS should also have the right to examine bills and have them explained and to be adequately informed of hospital rules and regulations, according to the principles set forth by the hospital association.

"A hospital has many functions to perform, including the prevention and treatment of disease, the education of both health professionals and patients, and the conduct of clinical research," the hospital association says. "All these activities must be conducted with an overriding concern for the patient, and, above all, the recognition of his dignity as a human being."

Some hospitals that have adopted the association's Bill of Rights for Patients have amended it so it has become a Bill of Patient's Rights and Responsibilities. These include complying with hospital rules and regulations applying to patient conduct; being considerate of other patients and making sure that visitors are also considerate of other patients.

The patient is held responsible for keeping appointments of giving advance notice of cancellations and for taking to the hospital all available information about past illnesses, hospitalizations, medication and other health matters. The patient is also expected to tell hospital officials if he or she does not understand or cannot follow instructions.

Prompt payment of bills is another patient responsibility.

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