



Patient Privacy in Medical Waiting Rooms

Women's Initiatives for Safer Environments (WISE), is a local organization working to improve the safety of women and other vulnerable groups in the Ottawa area. WISE works to address a range of the safety concerns and issues experienced by individuals, including the fear and unease commonly experienced by women out alone at night, to issues concerning the safety of women who are stalked and threatened by ex-partners.

One issue recently identified by community members that can put the personal safety of certain individuals at risk, are breaches in patient confidentiality and privacy when accessing medical services from doctors' offices, clinics, dental offices, and so on.

How does it happen?

Breaches in a patient's confidentiality and privacy commonly occur in medical waiting rooms when:

- Patients registering with reception are required to confirm their name, address, date of birth, reason for visit, or other identifying and personal information within earshot of other patients or individuals in the waiting room.
- Sensitive information about tests results, medications, or medical conditions is discussed in the hallways of the office or at the reception counter, and is overheard by other individuals.
- Reception staff speak with clients over the phone and discuss or repeat personal or identifying information.
- Patients inadvertently divulge personal details and compromise their privacy by volunteering unnecessary information when registering with reception.

Repercussions

Many of us don't give these practices a second thought. However, certain populations are at an elevated risk for having their personal and identifying information used against them. For example, women who have left a violent spouse may want to keep their new phone numbers and addresses private, and may fear that someone who knows their ex-partner could overhear this information and pass it along. Further, seniors are often at a higher risk for falling victim to identity theft or fraud, and as such could have their personal information misused by someone who overhears it. Finally, individuals with certain health problems, including HIV/AIDs and STIs, may want to keep their conditions private out of fear of being stigmatized, and discussions concerning medical tests or medications could inadvertently alert others to their condition.

Individuals in small towns have an even harder time at keeping information private, as the chances of having an acquaintance or neighbour overhear information in the waiting room is greatly

enhanced. This elevated risk similarly exists when medical centres services specific populations who are often known to each other.

How can information be safely obtained?

Reception staff are often required to discuss personal and identifying information with clients when they:

- Book appointments;
- Greet and register clients through the confirmation of personal information;
- Pass along medical information to other offices when they book referrals;
- Relay necessary information to patients concerning medical tests or medications at the reception counter or over the phone, etc.

However, reception staff can implement procedures to eliminate unintentional disclosure of sensitive information by considering the following recommendations.

Take Note of Waiting Room Layout and Features:

- Ensure that seating is faced away, or placed at a distance, from the reception desk. If possible, locate the reception desk in a separate room from the waiting room itself.
- Draw attention away from the reception desk by providing magazines, or create background noise by playing a radio or a television in order to mask conversations. A child's play area also focuses attention away from the reception desk.

Reception Desk Practices:

- Ensure that reception staff interacts with patients in hushed tones.
- Ensure that computer screens or appointment books are not within patients' eyesight.
- Reduce the amount of information required from patients when registering for their appointments.
- Ensure that follow-up discussions concerning medications or further tests are conducted in a private room.
- Locate phones and fax machines in the rear of the reception area in order to reduce the chances of phone conversations being overheard, or from having incoming faxes visible to patients.
- Install a glass divider between the reception desk and waiting room with windows that can be closed when not interacting with patients.
- Reduce the possibility for a queue of patients to form at the reception desk by ensuring a continued presence of staff at the desk, or by providing a bell that can alert reception staff to a waiting patient.
- Eliminate the practice of calling patients in for their appointments by their names.
- Eliminate or alter the practice of reception staff repeating personal information aloud when confirming appointments with patients over the phone.
- Instruct patients to bring in a document with their address or phone number if there has been a change of residency, instead of requiring patients to provide this information aloud.

What can patients do to protect their privacy?

Patients can also take precautions to protect their privacy and personal information in medical waiting rooms. Most importantly, patients should ensure that they do not provide unprompted or unnecessary personal or identifying information when registering for, or booking, an appointment. Further, patients must remain aware of their surroundings and the possibility of being overheard by other individuals when discussing their personal information with reception staff, and adjust their voices to reduce this possibility. Finally, patients should inquire about whether the medical facility has a policy on verbal communication about clients; as some organizations have their staff sign confidentiality agreements that include a commitment to keeping conversations about, or with, clients private, and not speaking about clients in communal areas such as reception or hallways.

Why we must remain vigilant about patient confidentiality and privacy

It is important to ensure patient confidentiality and privacy, as breaches may result in embarrassment for patients, or more serious, may result in the illegal use of their information by others. This in turn may put an individual's safety at risk; for example, a violent ex-spouse may gain access to information on his ex-partner's new address and resume abusive or harassing behaviours. Further, these breaches can reduce the trust a patient has for their doctor or medical centre and may discourage women or other vulnerable groups from accessing needed medical services.

For more information on women's safety, contact WISE at 613-230-6700 or wiseottawa.ca