1989-09

University Hospital News: September 1989 no. 6

University Hospital, Office of Media Relations

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/20307

Boston University
Boston, Mass. -- "The most powerful concept shaping the practice of modern medicine is the recognition that patients have human rights," writes George Annas, J.D., M.P.H., a professor of health law at Boston University School of Medicine, in the completely revised and updated second edition of *The Rights of Patients*. Annas, who is often called "the father of patients' rights," points out that we are in an age in which economics and technology often dictate medical choices. "The recognition of human rights is the only force powerful enough to prevent medicine from becoming an impersonal and dehumanizing industry," Annas writes.

Many patients aren't aware of their rights, and many physicians and health-care facilities fail to recognize them, says Annas, an internationally recognized expert on health law and medical ethics. Annas' book is written for patients and their families, health-care providers and hospital administrators.

In *The Rights of Patients*, Annas describes how to make the health-care system respond to patients' concerns, how to discover the medical treatment options available to patients, when and how to get a second medical opinion, and how to gain access to medical records.

In a question-and-answer format, Annas tackles some of the most critical issues faced by patients in their medical care, such as:

- When is a physician justified in not giving full information to the patient about a proposed treatment or procedure?
- What is the difference between consent and informed consent?
- Can a patient refuse treatment?
• If surgeons cannot agree on what the best treatment is, how can a patient decide what advice to accept?
• Do pregnant women have a right to genetic counseling and screening?
• Can pregnant women be charged with "fetal neglect" if they engage in behavior that injures their fetus?
• Can a competent adult refuse treatment even if the patient will die without it?
• Who has the right to refuse lifesaving treatment for an incompetent patient?
• How can an individual donate organs to others so that they may have them upon the individual's death?
• What are the major problems with the current medical malpractice system?

Annas outlines a model patient bill of rights listing 25 specific rights that should be accorded to patients, and proposes that each state adopt this bill of rights by statute. He also offers a five-point agenda for health-care facilities to enhance patients' rights and help humanize the hospital environment. Annas' five recommendations include: elimination of "routine" procedures; providing patients open access to their medical records; providing 24-hour-a-day visitation; requiring full experience disclosure before procedures are performed; and implementing an effective patient-rights advocate program, which includes a patient-centered bill of rights.

The most important step patients can take is to educate themselves about their rights. "The second is to exercise them regularly so the health-care professionals get used to the idea that citizens in the United States take their rights seriously and are not willing to abdicate them simply because they are sick," Annas emphasizes.

The Rights of Patients is published by Southern Illinois University Press and is part of the American Civil Liberties Union Handbook series.

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