

The Hippocratic Oath

I swear by Apollo the physician, by Esculapius, Hygeia, and Panacea, and I take to witness all the gods, all the goddesses, to keep according to my ability and my judgment, the following Oath.

"To consider dear to me as my parents him who taught me this art; to live in common with him and if necessary to share my goods with him; to look upon his children as my own brothers, to teach them this art if they so desire without fee or written promise; to impart to my sons and the sons of the master who taught me and the disciples who have enrolled themselves and have agreed to the rules of the profession, but to these alone the precepts and the instruction. I will prescribe regimens for the good of my patients according to my ability and my judgment and never do harm to anyone. To please no one will I prescribe a deadly drug nor give advice that may cause his death. Nor will I give a woman a pessary to procure abortion. But I will preserve the purity of my life and my art. I will not cut for stone, even for patients in whom the disease is manifest; I will leave this operation to be performed by practitioners, specialists in this art. In every house where I come I will enter only for the good of my patients, keeping myself far from all intentional ill-doing and all seduction and especially from the pleasures of love with women or with men, be they free or slaves. All that may come to my knowledge in the exercise of my profession or in daily commerce with men, which ought not to be spread abroad, I will keep secret and will never reveal. If I keep this oath faithfully, may I enjoy my life and practice my art, respected by all men and in all times; but if I swerve from it or violate it, may the reverse be my lot."

Although outdated and not really "politically correct," the Hippocratic oath is presented to physicians upon graduation from medical school. For doctors, genetic counselors, clinical scientists, and other healthcare professionals, the underlying overall message of the Hippocratic oath is valuable. In essence, it says that healthcare professionals will not knowingly do harm to their patients and that they will maintain a patient's privacy. But is privacy the best policy? Are there any circumstances in which a person's medical condition or test results should be revealed to persons other than the patient? When does a patient's right to privacy outweigh the public's right to knowledge and protection, and vice versa?

To Think About: Who should have access to an individual's medical records and under what circumstances?

Read each of the scenarios that follow. Using the chart displayed, decide which of the following persons or organizations should be given access to "private" medical information.

Scenario 1: A male fetus, still in the mother's womb, is diagnosed with HIV infection through antibody testing. The mother has been living with AIDS for over a year. The father (HIV clear) does not live in the same state as the pregnant mother. Who should be informed of the fetus' condition?

Persons/Organizations	Should be informed? Yes, No, or NA (not applicable)	Why/Why not? Any special conditions/qualifications?
Parent(s) of Patient		
Day Care Workers/Parents		
Healthcare Workers of Patient		
Educators of Patient		
Military		
Insurance Companies		
(Health, Car, Life)		
Department of Motor Vehicles		

Scenario 2: A male patient is diagnosed with generalized epilepsy characterized by grand mal seizures during which he may lose consciousness. He is a first-year kindergarten teacher responsible for 30 5-year-old children. His school is 35 miles away from his home. Who should be informed of his condition?

Persons/Organizations	Should be informed? Yes, No, or NA (not applicable)	Why/Why not? Any special conditions/qualifications?
Patient's Parents		
Spouse		
Adult Children of Patient		
Employer of Patient		
Parents of Students of Patient		
Military		
Insurance Companies (Health, Car, Life)		
Department of Motor Vehicles		

Scenario 3: A female pilot, who has just completed flight training, has been recently diagnosed with sickle cell disease through a genetic test and blood cell analysis. She has trained for 10 years to be an airline pilot and this is her "big break." She was hoping to serve in the Air National Guard as a pilot before entering her civilian job. She has never had any of the symptoms, including the most serious one, weakness due to lack of oxygen. Who should be informed of her genetic condition?

Persons/Organizations	Should be informed? Yes, No, or NA (not applicable)	Why/Why not? Any special conditions/qualifications?
Patient's Parents		
Fiancé		
Spouse		
Children of Patient		
Employer of Patient		
Educators of Patient		
Military		
Insurance Companies (Health, Car, Life)		
Department of Motor Vehicles		
Federal Aviation Administration		