

July 1, 2001

PATIENT POWERline from the desk of Marie Savard, M.D.

RE: Patient Bill of Rights

Dear Friend,

You might think that since I am a champion of patient rights, I would be jumping up and down applauding the bill approved by the Senate this week popularly referred to as the "Patient Bill of Rights". The truth is I am not sure how this bill will help most people.

I felt so strongly that I wrote a letter to the editor of my local newspaper, <http://inq.philly.com/content/inquirer/2001/06/28/opinion/LEDE28.htm?template=aprint.htm>. I received a number of responses from patients, many who learned the hard way how important it is to take more responsibility for one's health care. One man described his difficulty getting his medical records after he was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer. After a lot of complaining, he finally received a copy only to learn that his PSA test - the blood test to diagnose prostate cancer - was abnormally high for a number of years and yet no one told him. He wrote, "If only I had known sooner that it was my right to get a copy of my lab results and medical records. What a difference it would have made to me." He thanked me for reminding others like him that it is their job to ask for copies of their test results and ask questions. As I wrote in my letter to the editor, <http://inq.philly.com/content/inquirer/2001/06/28/opinion/LEDE28.htm?template=aprint.htm>, this bill will do little if anything to improve the quality of health care for most of us and could potentially reduce access even more by increasing the ranks of the uninsured. In my mind, the current debate is a lot about politics and little about providing good patient care. The really important debate should center on the growing ranks of the uninsured, the epidemic of medical mistakes and the rising costs of prescription drugs. Opening any of these three topics for a serious national discussion would do far more good than arguing, for example, about where a patient can sue their HMO - in federal or state court. Only the lawyers really care about that point.

Patients already have rights that would do far more to improve the quality of their health care and reduce medical mistakes, yet no one is talking about them. Patients have the right to collect, read and understand the information in their medical records and make them available to everyone who needs a look - yet patients face resistance when they ask and many patients and doctors erroneously think patients are not entitled to this information. Poor quality health care and numerous mistakes occur because vital information is not available when doctors need it most. Patients have the right to participate fully in medical decisions that effect them, but in truth patients are rarely given sufficient information and are not fully included in the decision making process

We could start today to work towards better and safer health care for all if we simply used the resources that we already have at hand, our patients. We don't need a "Patient Bill of Rights" and all the associated cost and red tape to give everyone a copy of their medical records and involve each patient more fully in decisions about their care.

When it comes to matters of our health I am reminded of the words of Benjamin Franklin, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." An ounce of prevention by giving patients a copy of their medical records and test results is far better than a pound of treatment or a large malpractice award in court after a person is diagnosed too late to make a difference.

To learn more about how to get involved more fully in your own health care please visit my web site at <http://www.DrSavard.com>. To read the letter I wrote to the editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer and the York Dispatch, link <http://inq.philly.com/content/inquirer/2001/06/28/opinion/LEDE28.htm?template=aprint.htm>, <http://63.147.65.16/default.asp?puid=2740&spuid=2740&indx=950434&article=on>.

Please feel free to share this message with your friends and family. I would also welcome your stories and questions.

Warm regards,

Marie Savard, M.D.

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