

March 2003

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

Re: Ask for Important Test Results Before Leaving the Emergency Room

Dear Friend,

Many of you know that I have cared for the Cabrini nuns as their family doctor for the past 20 years. In fact, much of my system that teaches patients how to manage their own health care, find a health buddy for doctor and hospital visits and collect copies of their medical records I learned from my experience with the sisters.

I would like to share with you something that happened a few weeks ago that once again reminded me how important it is for patients to be proactive when it comes to getting copies of their health information.

Sister “M” was an 84 year-old nun with a long history of high blood pressure and mild heart failure. She was taking a lot of medication, which included the diuretic (water or fluid pill) Lasix along with a potassium supplement. Three weeks ago she had a few days of diarrhea and began to feel very weak and tired. When she fainted, she was taken to the emergency room (ER) where her potassium level was apparently low. A low potassium level is not that unusual in a patient on chronic diuretics who suddenly gets diarrhea (the stool normally contains a lot of potassium). She was apparently given intravenous potassium in the ER and sent back to the convent.

I saw sister three days later and learned what had happened in the Emergency Room. I immediately asked to see a copy of her laboratory tests and any other important information from the ER visit. The sisters know how important it is for them to get copies of their test results and doctor consultation findings, so I was certain they would have that information to share with me.

You Are Entitled to Copies of the Information in Your Medical Record

The problem is they had NO useful information from the visit. The nurse caring for the sister told me, “We knew how important the information was and that you would ask for it - so we sent our most confident aide to the ER to ask (the sisters are naturally shy and intimidated by medical professionals just like many other people I know)”. The aide was denied any information other than a pre-printed discharge instruction sheet telling her to see her family doctor. She was told, “It is illegal and against our hospital policy to give you that information. If you want to get copies you will have to call our medical record department in a few weeks to obtain it”. The truth is this – you are entitled to copies of the information in your medical record – and no state law anywhere says otherwise.

I wondered what the ER thought I could do as the family doctor without the critical laboratory test information and other findings? I needed to know what the blood tests

showed, including the exact potassium level, the kidney function and other electrolytes and test results. This was critical information that would help me determine how to adjust the Lasix dose, how much more potassium to give, and how sister should be monitored and cared for in the future. The ER didn't even instruct the sister on how much Potassium or Lasix to take when she went home so the aide reasonable but incorrectly assumed they should just return to her previous dose.

Luckily I saw the sister shortly after the visit and was able to quickly repeat the blood tests (an unnecessary expense) and determine the right course of action. No major harm was done – this time.

Having Copies of Your Information Really Could Save Your Life

Unfortunately I have too often heard of stories where patients are seen in the ER for chest pain, diagnosed with heartburn or indigestion, and sent home with NO copies of their EKG or blood tests or reports - to follow up with their family doctor. The family doctor has no information to go on – often the doctor's office does not have a faxed copy of the EKG from the ER to compare and is often reassured that the ER made the correct diagnosis. Sadly many patients then suffer a heart attack that could have been avoided or treated.

If ONLY the ER had given the patient a copy of the EKG, blood tests and doctor notes from the visit to be shared with the family doctor – critical time and money - and even a life - could be saved.

Many ER's say that it is their policy to send a copy of the ER visit and the necessary information directly to the family doctor. Unfortunately all too often the information is lost in transit, sent too late, or not at all – or the patient ends up seeing another doctor altogether.

How much more efficient – and potentially life and dollar saving – to give the patient their own vital information when they leave the ER to share with whomever they see next? The health care system is too complex, fragmented and just plain lousy at predictably sharing vital information in a timely fashion. Patient's lives are just too important to accept less than perfection.

It is about time patients get more involved in all aspects of their health care and health decisions. Having patients keep original copies of all their test results and showing this information to every practitioner they see will save money

Sister "M"'s repeat blood potassium was still very low so I increased her dose of potassium and stopped her Lasix for a few days. Sister was also weighed every day and checked for fluid retention (edema) to be sure she didn't suddenly gain a lot of fluid from holding the Lasix temporarily. I am glad things worked out this time – but all too often the ending is not so good!

Remember to always ask for important test results for you or a loved one before leaving the Emergency Room. That doesn't mean you need a report from every visit – but if you have important tests done such as blood work, an EKG or x-ray for a serious potentially life-threatening concern – ask for a copy of the results. Waiting a few weeks to get this information from the medical record department could be too late – and is a waste of everyone's time. Hoping that the tests will be sent to your family doctor is a gamble not worth taking.

To print a sample letter to give to your doctor(s) requesting your medical records, <http://www.drsavard.com/docs/sampeletter.pdf>.

The **Savard Health Record** is a simple six-step system for keeping your own complete, accurate and continually updated medical chart. With your **Health Record** in hand at every office visit, you'll help your doctor help you. To order your copy visit, http://www.drsavard.com/system_record.htm.

Be sure to share this newsletter with your family and friends and encourage them to subscribe at <http://www.DrSavard.com>.

Warm regards,

Marie Savard, M.D.

Marie Savard, M.D. is an internationally known internist, women's health expert and champion of patient empowerment. She is the founder of The Savard System, dedicated to teaching patients how to manage their own healthcare. She is the author of two highly acclaimed books, *How to Save Your Life: The Savard System for Managing-and Controlling-Your Health Care* (Warner Books, Inc. 2000) and *The Savard Health Record: a Six-Step System for Managing Your Health Care* (Time-Life, Inc. 2000).

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