

Editorial

Patient Rights During Surgery

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A Patient's Guide to Empowerment in the Operating Room

The prospect of surgery can be daunting. Between preoperative anxiety and complex medical jargon, it is easy to feel like a passive participant in your own care.¹ However, it is crucial to remember that you are not just a patient; you are a recipient of healthcare services and the central decision-maker throughout your treatment. Understanding your fundamental rights before, during, and after a surgical procedure is essential for ensuring your safety, dignity, and peace of mind.^{2,3}

The foundation of patient rights is the ethical principle of informed consent. This involves far more than simply signing a form; it is an ongoing process of communication. You have the right to fully understand the procedure that you are about to undergo.⁴⁻⁹ This includes:

- **Diagnosis:** A clear explanation of your medical condition and why surgery has been recommended.
- **Procedure:** A description of the surgery in understandable terms: step by step.
- **Risks and benefits:** A thorough discussion of the potential benefits of the surgery, as well as the possible risks, complications, and side effects, no matter how rare.
- **Reasonable Alternatives:** Information about other treatment options available to you, including non-surgical approaches or different surgical techniques, along with their respective risks and benefits.
- **Consequences of Doing Nothing:** An understanding of what would likely happen if you decided to refuse the surgery.

You have the right to ask questions until you feel comfortable. Questions such as, "What is your experience performing this specific procedure?" "What is the expected recovery time?" and "How will my pain be managed?" are not only acceptable but also encouraged. The consent form is a legal document confirming that this discussion has taken place, but the right lies in the

communication process.¹⁰⁻¹⁶

The Right to a Safe and Controlled Environment

Once you have consented to the surgery, your rights continue directly in the operating room (OR). A critical safety standard you have the right to expect is the Surgical Safety Checklist, often referred to as a "Time Out." This is a mandatory pause before the incision is made, during which the entire surgical team—surgeons, anesthesiologists, and nurses—verbally confirms:

- The correct identity of the patient.
- The correct procedure.
- The correct surgical site, which should already have been marked.

This simple, systematic check is a powerful tool designed to prevent rare but devastating errors like wrong-site surgery or wrong-patient. You have the right to know that this protocol is rigorously followed.

Furthermore, you have the right to be treated in a sterile environment to minimize the risk of infection. This includes the right to know that instruments are properly sterilized and that the surgical team follows strict hygiene protocols like hand hygiene and wearing sterile gloves and gowns.¹⁷⁻²¹

The Right to Privacy and Dignity

Your modesty and dignity must be respected at all times. Although surgery may require physical exposure, the surgical team is obligated to limit this exposure to what is medically necessary. You should be draped in a manner that keeps you covered as much medically as possible, and all discussions about your body should remain professional and clinical.

Your right to privacy also extends to your medical information. The details of your procedure and your personal health information are protected by law and must be kept confidential, shared only with those directly involved in your care or with individuals whom you have authorized.^{3,22-23}

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In the operating room, it can be difficult to know each team member's role. You have the right to know the names and roles of the key people responsible for your care. Although your primary surgeon is ultimately responsible for the procedure, surgical assistants, an anesthesiologist or nurse anesthetist responsible for sedation and pain control, and circulating nurses all play vital roles.. Don not hesitate to ask, "Who will be performing the surgery?" and "Who will administer my anesthesia?"^{1,3,5,8,18,20}

The Right to Refuse or Halt Treatment

Your autonomy does not end at the OR doors. Although you cannot direct the surgery while under anesthesia, you retain the right to refuse treatment or withdraw consent until the moment anesthesia is administered. If you have a last-minute question or a concern that something is not right, you have the right to speak up and ask for a pause to obtain clarification.^{1-3,5,17-19}

What if something goes wrong?

If an unexpected outcome or complication occurs during surgery, you have the right to a clear and honest explanation of what happened.. This is part of a medical-ethical standard known as "duty of candor." If you believe your rights were violated or you were harmed due to negligence, you have the right to seek a second opinion, access your full medical records, and file a formal complaint with the hospital or a regulatory body.^{9,19,21,23}

In conclusion, entering the operating room can feel like a loss of control, but you are protected by a robust framework of ethical and legal rights. By being informed and proactive, asking questions, understanding consent, and relying on safety protocols, you can move from being a passive patient to becoming an empowered partner in your own surgical care. Your voice is your most powerful tool for advocacy; use it.^{10,18,19,23}

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Competing Interests

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