

24-hour visitation found to help patients, loved ones

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In an episode of the classic TV series "The Golden Girls," Rose is hospitalized after collapsing from a sudden heart attack. Dorothy and Blanche beg to visit their housemate and dear friend before she is wheeled in for triple bypass surgery. But the nursing supervisor is stern, and clear: Family ONLY.

In a scene from the classic movie "Grumpy Old Men," Walter Matthau goes to visit his best friend Jack Lemmon, who has just suffered a life-threatening cardiac episode after the two of them had a fight over Ann-Margret.

When the attending nurse asks Matthau if he is family, Matthau doesn't bat an eyelash before giving the only answer he knows will get him in: "Yes."

There's a reason why the sudden hospitalization of loved ones is such a frequently used scenario in movies and television – it's relatable. The desperate need to comfort friends or relatives at their bedside is a universally human situation. Fortunately for patients and their friends and families everywhere, hospitals are opening up access. Welcome to the hospital and ICU of the modern age – open 24 hours a day to friends and family alike, ICU or otherwise.

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When faced with illnesses, being surrounded by loved ones at any time of the day or night can literally contribute to the patient's getting well, experts say. There's even a medical management name for it now – "Patient/Family-Centered Care."

By the way – "family" doesn't necessarily require blood lines anymore. "Whoever 'family' is, is defined by the patient," said Pamela Bell, director of patient and family-centered care at the Valley Hospital in Ridgewood. Bell knows firsthand how painful it can be to have limited access to a sick loved one. She pushed for an open-visitation policy at Valley after she had difficulty visiting another hospital's ICU where her partner was dying in 2014. "It gave me the perspective of a family member," she said.

While at first there was some trepidation among nurses that lifting visitation restrictions could lead to all-night gatherings that might get out of hand, Bell said so far, so good. She stressed that this is more than just about visiting hours and rules, per se. "It comes under the umbrella of a bigger social change," she said. "We want to collaborate with the family, and get the family to participate in the patient's care."

Nearly 90 percent of ICUs in the U.S. restricted visitations in some shape or form, like what time people could be at a patient's bedside and for how long, according to a survey of more than 600 hospitals published in 2013 in the journal *Critical Care*, among the most recent data on the subject.

Research published last year by the American Association of Critical Care Nurses said evidence suggested that "flexible visitation decreases anxiety, confusion and agitation, reduces cardiovascular complications, decreases length of ICU stay, makes the patient feel more secure, increases patient satisfaction, and increases quality and safety."

Examples of Patient/Family-Centered Care at Valley include providing more comfortable sleeper chairs for the visiting relatives or friends, a place for them to use their laptops, more sectioned-off, private areas to consult with doctors, and making the patient and the family fully understand what medicines need to be taken, when, how often and why.

"Knowledge is power. It really decreases everyone's anxiety," Bell said. "It's one thing to say, 'Here are your meds.' It's another thing to say, 'Here are your meds, here is why you need them, this is what they do for you.' It's making everyone understand their own health care."

Often the family is not only a team member in the patient's recovery process but the patient's very own memory and voice, said Mary Jo Tracy, nurse manager of the ICU at Holy Name Hospital and Medical Center in Teaneck. "Many of our patients cannot communicate well with us due to the severity of their illness. So much information comes from significant others, close friends or family," Tracy said. "At Holy Name, we have, for some time now, relaxed our visitation rules to 24/7, and to include close friends, significant others. We have acknowledged the fact



that the family is a very important part of our health care team.”

Tracy said studies have shown that more family and friend involvement can contribute to shorter lengths of stay, less confusion and better overall patient satisfaction.

“Think about it. If you were seriously ill, how frightened you would be in a strange environment, with people you don’t know. Wouldn’t you want your loved ones to be with you as much as possible?”

While there has been a “24/7 open invitation visiting policy” at Hackensack University Medical Center since 2005, there is a limit to two visitors per patient at a time, according to Kelly Briggs, administrative director of Critical Care and Heart & Vascular Hospital at Hackensack UMC.

“There are always exceptions. If someone is end-of-life, we will always invite other people to come. We look at every individual patient. . . We have recognized that visitation is a fundamental component of the healing and recovery process of the patient, so it makes sense for family members to be invited in for support.”

All that having been said, there’s still something to be said for peace and quiet, too, Briggs said. “There have been many studies about how quiet environments are so impor-

tant to the recovery process. We also include dimming the lights, from 9 p.m. to 8 a.m., and we also ask all visitors and health care providers to silence their cellphones during those hours as well. We also have what we call the Care Channel. It’s on every television in each patient’s room. It has nature imagery, soothing landscapes and soothing music to help patients relax. We have also eliminated overhead paging, with the exception of emergencies.”

Some hospitals, like Valley, are even going beyond the general rooms and ICU. Bell said that the Post Anesthesia Care Unit (PACU), where patients are just coming out of surgery, used to be completely off-limits. Now, if the patient so chooses, they can see a loved one as they are waking up from their operation. “We used to be very strict about not letting people down there,” Bell said. “And not every patient even wants it.”

But for those who do, there couldn’t be a better time to see a familiar face. “It just gives them that brief moment to see their loved one. And for their loved one to see that they’re OK,” Bell said. “Then they can relax, and go grab a bite to eat.”

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SAL BENEDETTO/THE VALLEY HOSPITAL

Studies show more contact with loved ones aids in patient recovery.