

- Listen to the patient/family and emphasize your commitment to on-going communication. “I am so sorry this happened to you. Let me find out why.

#### How do I respond to anger from the patient/family?

- “I am sorry you are upset. I’m upset too. Please know that I will do everything I can to understand how and why this happened.”

#### How should I document this?

- Describe the event and disclosure discussion in the medical record. If you have questions, and are a:
  - Washington University faculty, fellow or staff call 314-362-6956 or page 424-0411
  - BJH resident or staff call 454-7566
  - SLCH resident or staff call 454-4614

For questions about these guidelines, please contact WUSM Patient Safety at 314-747-2933 (more information is available at <http://fpp.wustl.edu> click on “Disclosure to Patients of Serious Unanticipated Adverse Events”).

# WUSM Guidelines for Disclosure of Adverse Events to Patients



Washington University Physicians

Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis

# WUSM Guidelines for Disclosure of Adverse Events to Patients

## KEY PRINCIPLES

- Patients/family have the right to know the details of significant events that can impact their health.
- Timely, honest and sustained communication with patients and/or their families is an essential component of exceptional health care.

## When should I disclose an adverse event?

Ask yourself:

- 1) Did it harm or hurt patient?
- 2) Did it change care or require intervention?

If the answer to either question is “Yes”, patient/family disclosure is appropriate.

## Who should disclose?

- The attending MD should speak with the patient or family as soon as the patient. **Early contact is important even when all the facts are still unknown.**
- Convene or consult the care team first, to discuss the known facts and prepare to advise the patient/family -- **a consistent message is important.**
- When more than one attending physician is

involved, they should consult on the disclosure conversation before speaking to the patient and/or family.

- Every physician should be responsible for disclosing medical errors for which he/she is personally responsible. Physicians should not disclose perceived errors made by other caregivers without involving those caregivers in the disclosure process.

## What should I say?

- **Acknowledge that an adverse event or medical error occurred.** Describe the facts as you know them and don't speculate.
- **Express your personal concern.**  
Be compassionate and say you are sorry.
- **Tell the patient/family what it means for their ongoing medical care.**
- **Let the patient/family know that you will find out what happened and what steps will be taken to prevent similar events in the future.** Before leaving, identify one contact person (attending physician) for future discussions.