



The Unintended Consequences of Restrictive Visitation Policies During the Pandemic: Planetree Perspectives on Safe, Effective Family Presence Guidelines

A family removes their elderly mother from the long-term care center she's resided at safely and comfortably for several years, after the facility prohibits all family visitation.

A woman in labor drives several hours with her partner to a hospital in a neighboring state that allows birth partners to stay during labor and delivery, after local facilities prohibit a birth partner's presence. Other women seek out home birth options to avoid this situation in the future.

Parents of a child with a high fever and cough are reluctant to bring their child to the hospital for fear that they will be separated in the emergency department, as this new policy has gone into effect at local facilities.

A terminally ill father dies alone in a hospital ICU, his family prevented from being with him due to a total elimination of visitation in the facility.

These are just a few of the unintended consequences that are already occurring based on restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic being placed on family presence in healthcare settings. Healthcare teams are working tirelessly to provide optimal care for patients, while attempting to find a balance between maintaining safety by limiting exposure to the virus and supporting their commitment to patient and family-centered care. The National Academy of Medicine has underscored the essential engagement of patients and their families in their own care, and our healthcare system has defined high quality care as care planned and delivered with patients and their families as members of their own care teams. As the situation becomes more serious in some regions, and healthcare organizations reassess their customary approach to visitation, it is imperative that we strive for a reasonable balance that allows for family presence, especially in the situations noted above.

Given the nature of COVID-19, which is known to spread easily especially among the ill and the elderly, and can be transmitted by individuals who are asymptomatic, it is prudent to introduce temporary measures for managing family presence in a way that supports the need for physical distancing. These include screening all visitors for symptoms prior to entry to healthcare settings, issuing PPE as appropriate, limiting and monitoring the number of visitors for each patient and practicing social distancing within the health organization.

For further information on developing visitation guidelines that promote safe family presence during the pandemic, follow this link: bit.ly/pandemicvisitation.