

Queen Elizabeth Hospital announces investigation report on complaints of patient information handling

The following is issued on behalf of the Hospital Authority:

Regarding the two recent complaint cases on patient information handling, Queen Elizabeth Hospital (QEH) today (October 29) announced the findings of the investigation:

On June 12, QEH received several patients who had possibly participated at a mass gathering event. There were allegations that some staff members of the Accident and Emergency Department (AED) had improperly disclosed patient information to third parties, leading to the arrest of some patients during their consultation at QEH.

QEH is dedicated to upholding the protection of patient privacy all along. QEH took the complaints very seriously and promptly followed up in accordance with the established mechanism. On June 24, QEH invited three non-QEH members to take part in the investigation. The group interviewed the staff concerned and took an in-depth review of the cases.

The following key findings and conclusions were noted:

1. There was no evidence of any AED staff member passing patient information directly to third parties, including police officers, in the AED;
2. The AED of QEH is always congested due to space constraints. The healthcare workers are facing great challenges in protecting patient privacy when handling a large number of patients. Moreover, there was no clear segregation between the AED triage station and the patient waiting hall. The physical design is suboptimal for protecting patient privacy.
3. The members noted the long-standing practice of police officers requesting gummed labels with personal information of individual patients from the Admission Office for law enforcement purposes. Although the investigation found no evidence of hospital staff passing information of the cases concerned to police officers, the practice had been suspended immediately.

Members made recommendations to QEH to improve the physical setting of the AED to enhance the protection of patient privacy, including the delineation of the clinical zones in the AED with prominent floor signage at the entrance of the triage station and consultation cubicles; and installing a transparent partition at the triage station to enhance the protection of

patient privacy while meeting operational needs.

QEH accepted the investigation findings that there was no evidence of staff passing patient information to third parties. QEH also expressed gratitude to the members for their efforts. QEH has implemented the improvement works in the AED based on the recommendations. Signage and partitions have been set up in appropriate areas for delineating the clinical zone in the AED and strengthening privacy at the triage station to enhance the protection of patient privacy. QEH agreed that the previous practice of responding to police officers' requests for patient labels for law enforcement purposes compromised the principle of patient privacy protection. This practice has already been suspended.

QEH has communicated with staff on the findings of the investigation report and reiterated the stance on its dedication to patient privacy protection. QEH will continue to listen to the views of frontline staff and provide necessary support. The Hospital Authority has also informed the Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data about the investigation findings and recommendations.

QEH expressed its gratitude again to the non-QEH members for participating in the investigation. The members included Deputy Hospital Chief Executive (Operations) and Consultant of Accident and Emergency Department, Prince of Wales Hospital, Dr Cheung Nai-kwong; Cluster General Manager (Nursing), Kowloon East Cluster, Mr Eric Tang Siu-keung; and Member of QEH Hospital Governing Committee, Mr Yip Shiu-kwong.