

Informed consent

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Once upon a time, doctors were considered as God, then time changed, and the doctors considered themselves below God, but only by 2 cm. Now, nobody considers doctors as God, but in-fact, they have become punching bags for all types of people. They have become the source of money when their family, relatives or even their neighbor dies despite the doctors' best efforts. Which doctor would want to do bad for his patient deliberately? Yes, there could be negligence and they should be addressed promptly and properly, not by beating the doctors but by going to the court of law.

One of the reasons for all the altercation between care giver and care taker is probably due to the fact that the doctors do not include the patient in decision making of their management. The best way for the patient to be a decision maker of their own examination or treatment is to explain to them about their disease in their own words so that they understand. This is informed consent. A proper informed consent empowers the patient because then the patient understands the disease, the need and the choice of management. Thus, the patient can properly decide on what he/she wants for his/her own body. As patients know more about their own disease, the more they will be in control of their treatment and feel that they are actively participating in the management of their disease. This not only helps the patient but also helps the doctors more, because anything a patient feels that it was his/her decision for the particular examination or treatment, he/she will be more cooperative. Thus, a proper informed consent is beneficial for the patient and the doctors.

The best way to equalize the relationship between the doctors and patients is for each to know their and other's rights, so that one does not suppress the others rights. The doctors' right has been mentioned from the time of

Hippocratic Oath to guide them in what they can and cannot do; similarly the patients should have similar guidelines too. Informed consent help the patient attain their right to choose. As medicine is not all or none phenomenon, it will be the doctors' job to explain to the patient in the patients' own level of understanding about his/her examination or treatment to empower him/her to choose his/her management of the disease.

The informed consent helps the patient by informing him/her about:

- why he/her is being offered the examination or treatment
- what it will involve
- what the benefits are
- whether there are any risks or side effects
- how large or small the risks are
- whether there are any alternatives
- what might happen if one doesn't have the examination or treatment
- what may be the cost
- the name of the doctor who is responsible for the patient care
- It will also give the patient the right to ask questions if he/she does not understand, or wants to know more. If the person taking the consent is not able to answer the questions, the patient can ask for someone who can. The patient should also be explained that if he/she wants, one can have a second opinion.
- If the patient wants, some one can be with him/her when he/she is being told about the examination or treatment.

This could be a friend, a relative, a partner, a carer, another member of staff or an independent representative (advocate).

- Sometime when the patient finds it difficult to take in what has been told, he/she may ask for written information which can be taken away to make a decision.
- The patient can take time to decide depending on the type of disease. In emergencies, decisions have to be taken quickly, in other cases, one can take some time.
- The patient can change his/her mind about giving consent to an examination or treatment at any time. He/she should tell the doctor of his decision as soon as he makes up his mind.

The informed consent may not be same in all hospitals but at least they should have some important points common in all so that the doctors also do not miss any important points to explain. All hospitals in Nepal have some form of informed consent, but most were not up to the standard. Recently, Society of Surgeons of Nepal (SSN) started an initiative by having a task force to come up with a standard informed consent, which was followed by a workshop with executives of various hospitals and chaired by the secretary of Ministry of Health and Population. The recommended informed consent form would be distributed to all hospitals and although it would be nice to have a uniform informed consent form all over Nepal, it may not be possible and not even necessary. SSN would be satisfied if the main points are retained even if they have to modify the existing form. Some of the important points that is necessary in the informed consent are:

- Name, age, sex, bed no., ward and date
- Diagnosis and treatment (surgical procedure)
- Some special complications regarding the particular disease (remind the patient that there could also be anaesthetic complications too)
- A statement about the informed consent which states that patient understands the explanations given about the examination or treatment, and has willingly signed the consent
- Signature and full name of the patient and his/her accompanying person
- Doctors signature, full name and a witness (another junior doctor or nurse)
- Guardian's signature in case the patient is a child or is not able to give consent

Having a good informed consent is only half the battle, how to implement it in the hospital and how to conduct a good informed consent so that patient is comfortable and is given all the options, is the other half of the battle. It may take some time, but once it is followed with proper standard, it will help both the patients and the doctors by empowering the patient to choose and to participate in his/her management. This is the ultimate goal of informed consent which is also a good medical practice.