

## **The Importance Of Having A Chaperone Policy For Urgent Care Centers**

In light of the recent explosion of sexual assault and abuse allegations being made across the country, many physicians and hospitals have turned to chaperones as a way to mitigate risk. Though the idea of having a chaperone, due to the nature of the word, may seem archaic or unnecessary, it is highly important in today's world of flying accusations. It is more important than ever that physicians and medical facilities have a chaperone policy to ensure the protection of both physicians and patients. For urgent care centers, this can look a little different due to the unique nature of the setting. However, owners and operators of urgent care centers should carefully consider the case for having a chaperone policy in their treatment facility and what should be included in it. Doing so can help protect the facility, its employees, and its patients, all while keeping the practice professional and reliable.

### **What Is A Chaperone In The Medical Setting?**

As you might imagine, a chaperone is present in the treatment room with the physician and the patient. He or she observes the exam and ensures that things go according to policy and that nothing inappropriate happens. The role of a chaperone is twofold. They are there to both protect the physician and to protect the patient. Generally, a chaperone is already an employee of the healthcare facility, as it is usually not financially realistic to hire a full-time chaperone. This person could be a front office worker, but preferably is someone with at least some medical training, such as a medical assistant, a nurse technician, or a medical scribe.

### **What Does A Chaperone Do?**

In essence, chaperones are present for an exam or visit to observe. As long as everything is done appropriately, they shouldn't have to do anything else. However, if something inappropriate does occur, initiated by either the physician or the patient, a chaperone should interject. They can stop something inappropriate from happening in the first place by paying attention to the atmosphere of the exam or at least stop inappropriate actions before they get out of hand.

### **How Does Having A Chaperone Benefit The Patient And The Physician?**

For the patient, having a chaperone in the room reassures them that they are safe from abuse or sexual misconduct by the physician. Simply having someone else in the room can make them feel better, especially in cases where the physician and patient are different genders or during sensitive exams of the reproductive regions or times when the patient is undressed. However, a chaperone should be present regardless of gender, as abuse can occur between any two individuals.

For the physician, a chaperone acts as an insurance policy against false claims of abuse or sexual misconduct allegations. Should a patient falsely accuse the physician of something, the chaperone who was present can act as an independent, unbiased witness to testify on behalf of the physician. Chaperones also protect the physician by limiting the chances of a patient initiating inappropriate behavior.

### **What Should A Chaperone Policy For An Urgent Care Center Include?**

As mentioned, a chaperone policy for an urgent care center looks a bit different than it would for another type of healthcare facility. This is due to the fact that patients and physicians don't have an established relationship, the care setting is often quick and time-sensitive, and urgent care centers must find a way to hire a chaperone within their budget. Having a chaperone policy in place can help prevent expensive and damaging false allegations against providers and reassures patients that their care will be handled professionally. Therefore, it is practically essential in today's society to have such a policy. Urgent care operators and owners should consider the following points to include their chaperone policy for their facility:

- Patients should be informed and free to request a chaperone for any portion of their exam and this request should be honored whenever possible (AMA Code of Medical Ethics Opinion 1.2.4).
- Chaperones should be an unbiased individual who is part of the healthcare team or an employee of the healthcare facility. Chaperones should not be a family member (CEJA Report 10-A98).
- A chaperone should be used even when a patient's trusted companion or relative is present (AMA Code of Medical Ethics Opinion 1.2.4).
- An opportunity for private conversation with the patient should be provided without the chaperone present. Physicians should minimize inquiries or history taking of a sensitive nature during a chaperoned examination (AMA Code of Medical Ethics Opinion 1.2.4).
- Physicians should require chaperones to adhere to the same patient privacy and confidentiality practices as they do (CEJA Report 10-A98).
- Physicians should carefully document the name and information of the chaperone who was present. Should they need contacted if an allegation occurs down the road, they will be accessible.