

The Importance of Chaperones during physical examinations

BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee would like to remind providers of the importance of having a chaperone during physical examinations. It not only protects the member but the provider as well. The following information is from a report by the Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs (CEJA Report 10-A98), American Medical Association (AMA) that can be used as an aid on professional behavior during physical exams. The council discusses three important areas regarding the use of chaperones: Benefits of chaperones, determining a need for chaperones and finally recommended guidelines.

The use of chaperones during physical exams has three benefits:

1. It provides reassurance to patients of the professional character of the exam,
2. A witness is available to support the physician's innocence should a misunderstanding or false accusation be made by the patient, and,
3. It offers advantages in convenience and time efficiency when authorized health professionals serve as chaperones and can assist with procedures such as gynecologic examinations.

To evaluate the need for a chaperone, the Council suggests weighing the following considerations:

- The perceived intimate nature of the exam "A sense of invasiveness towards different features of the physical exam can vary among individual patients. However, there is a general consensus that an examination of reproductive organs (i.e., a pelvic, testicular, or breast exam) or an examination of the rectum heightens the importance of a chaperone."
- The nature of the physician/patient relationship "For a new visit or first-time examination, patient's should be apprised of the availability of chaperones. Custom has dictated that chaperones are most commonly offered to patients of the opposite sex, and more frequently to female patients of male physicians. Whatever the social custom, it is important that patients from all demographic categories feel comfortable requesting a chaperone."
- The preferred type of chaperone "Whenever possible, authorized health professionals should serve as chaperones rather than office clerks or family members. Unless specifically requested by the patient, family members should not be used as chaperones. Health professionals are held to standards for safeguarding patient privacy and confidentiality. Furthermore, their status affirms the formal nature of the examination"

The council recommends the following guidelines:

- From the standpoint of ethics and prudence, the protocol of having chaperones available on a consistent basis for patient examinations is recommended. A policy that patients are free to make a request for a chaperone should be established in each health care setting. This policy should be communicated to patients, either by means of a prominent notice or preferably through a conversation initiated by the intake nurse of the physician.
- The request by a patient to have a chaperone should be honored.
- An authorized health professional should serve as a chaperone whenever possible.
- Physicians should establish clear rules in their practices about respecting patient privacy and confidentiality to which all chaperones must adhere.
- If a chaperone is to be provided, a separate opportunity for private conversation between the patient and the physician should also be arranged. The physician should keep inquiries and history taking, especially those of a sensitive nature, to a minimum during the course of the chaperoned examination.