

FIGO Human Rights and Women's Health Case

The Clinic Lacks Privacy

R.L. is a medical student at the teaching hospital in the capital city of a developing country. She has heard that women in the area generally know that when they attend the hospital's gynecology outpatient clinic, they will be interviewed and examined by student doctors and nurses along with the teaching consultant. R.L. is one of six students assigned to work with Professor M.S., who has a reputation as an excellent teacher and clinician. Today R.L. joins three other medical students and two nursing students to learn to perform vaginal speculum examinations.

Professor M.S. and a female nurse see patients in a clinic room that has no curtains or partitions. During the consultation, the women must remove their clothes in full view of the students. The consultant does not ask the women if they are agreeable to the students being present at the consultation and does not seek the patients' permission to teach the students how to place a vaginal speculum.

C.P. is a 32-year-old patient who is being seen in the clinic for heavy bleeding and a lower abdominal mass. She is embarrassed and distressed by the large number of people in the room and by the fact that she is menstruating. She asks R.L. whether it is absolutely necessary for them to remain while she undresses. When R.L. relays this query to Professor M.S., he retorts, "She knows she has come to a teaching hospital. I cannot have all the students leaving the room every time I ask a woman to undress and lie on the examination table, and then re-enter to watch my examination. We do not have enough time to offer women that degree of privacy in this clinic – and manage to get through 30 patients in the same morning. Tell the patient to undress or to come back another time."

Questions for discussion

1. What are the medical issues in this case? Specifically:
 - a. What is the differential diagnosis for the patient's symptoms?
 - b. What are the most likely health and social consequences of the failure to respect this patient's privacy?
2. Using the Integrating Human Rights and Health Checklist, identify the human rights that were infringed in this case.
3. How might privacy policies and practices of this clinic have an impact on the health of women in the community?
4. How might this clinic's procedures be redesigned to accommodate patient privacy and the need to train medical students?



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5. What policies and practices regarding privacy are in place at your outpatient clinic?

