

2 INTRODUCTION: PATIENT RIGHTS

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Last year we had a symposium on Informed Consent, which is now published. Most of you should have received a copy of this document.

This was an attempt on our part to emphasize some of the patient's rights within a medical setting. It is a subject which is too often taken for granted, and too often ignored by the medical and paramedical team.

Apart from crass abuses of human relations, that hopefully occur only occasionally, one is constantly reminded of the very frequent, relatively minor, yet none the less annoying aspects of patient-doctor relationship, where the patient is less than happy with the encounter. Such dissatisfaction arises not so much from incompetence on the part of the medical/paramedical team, as from lack of information, or from an inability to meet the patient's expectations. These in turn may be realistic or otherwise depending on the sort of practice that we indulge in. When there is a queue of 50 persons at out-patients for instance, it is unrealistic to expect more than the most perfunctory of exchanges of information. I also believe that an unprepared patient requires far more time to digest biological and medical facts than one who has a reasonable background of education and biological information. We in Malta still have a long way to go in this direction.

A Charter for patient's rights appears to be a minimum benchmark for us to have in front of us. I believe also that we require a change in attitude, an attempt to deal with patients as equals and not merely as dependent inferiors. It is amazing how less frequent are complaints relating to patients' rights in the private sector where

the question of status and equality is perhaps less obvious.

The list of patient rights is large and even conflicting. There are rights to treatment and to not having treatment, rights to live and to die, rights that affect the individual adult and the unborn, rights of minors and of the aged; rights to know and not to know one's genetic constitution, rights to know reasonable risks associated with any procedure, and so on.

Today's panel will no doubt touch on many of these topics from the medical, legal, philosophical as well as the layperson's point of view. I believe this is a topic which should make us concentrate on what sort of practice we have, and whether we can improve on this service. Particularly relevant in my opinion is to highlight those factors which prevent us from identifying major issues and circumstances where we perceive a less than ideal practice of patient rights.