

Caregiving: Next of Kin

By Alex Cukan
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Part 1 of 2.

Almost 1 million people arrive at U.S. hospital emergency departments each year unconscious or unable to talk, and many may not have identification or anyone to identify them.

As Hurricane Katrina and Sept. 11, 2001, made vividly clear, a disaster can happen quickly and unexpectedly. People can become separated from family or friends, and hospital personnel sometimes cannot identify them or their medical histories. Others may go jogging, get injured and be unable to speak and have no identification on them.

"It's simply good medical practice to make every effort to identify a patient with no identification and try to notify the family so we can have as much information and medical history," Dr. Nathan Vermedahl, a Colorado family physician, told UPI's Caregiving.

That did not happen in the case of 71-year-old Elaine Sullivan, an active grandmother who lived on her own in Chicago. She fell in her bathroom and injured her mouth, leaving her unable to speak.

"The hospital had our name and contact number on a cover sheet of her chart but didn't call us - or her insurer or even her personal physician -- for six days," granddaughter Laura Greenwald told Caregiving. "My mother and I work in the entertainment industry in California and we had no idea my grandmother was in the hospital, let alone in intensive care."

By the time Greenwald and her mother, Janet, learned of the hospitalization, they knew they could not make it back in time to be with her.

"We pleaded with the physicians and the nursing staff to get a phone to her so she could at least hear our voices for what would probably be the last time, but they refused," Greenwald said. "We found that most states did not require hospitals or nursing homes to notify relatives. It may be done because it's always been done, but it's not required -- and sometimes it doesn't get done."

"About 90 percent the time, if a hospital can't contact a relative for some reason, it falls through the cracks," Greenwald's mother, Janet, told Caregiving. Greenwald and her mother were committed to never having another family go through what they did, so they began talking to

state legislators in California and Illinois.

"The Next of Kin laws, enacted in California and Illinois in 2001, require hospitals to make every effort possible to notify the next of kin of patients who are unconscious or cannot give informed consent, within 24 hours of their admission," Greenwald said. "In my grandmother's case, we feel that simple act would have saved her life. Not only would we have been able to be with her, but we would have seen to it that she receive proper medical treatment or that she be transferred to another hospital."

Greenwald and her mother started a non-profit agency, the Next of Kin Education Project, to help educate hospital personnel to follow the laws in California and Illinois: They must make reasonable efforts to contact family members within 24 hours of admittance.

"We developed posters and computer mouse pads to help make what we call the 'seven steps' to make notification easier and second nature," Greenwald said. "Hospitals want to abide by the law."

The Seven Steps to Successful Notification Kit is being distributed free of charge to healthcare professionals, and Seven Steps products are also available for purchase on the Web at www.nokep.org.

"We've just begun distributing the kit free of charge to about 100,000 hospital decision-makers nationwide," Greenwald said. "I'm glad to say that we have a few terrific sponsors, but of course we are still hard at work meeting our budget."

The Greenwalds thought going state by state would be an unwieldy process, so they contracted Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Ill., who agreed to introduce a federal bill to make contacting next of kin mandatory nationwide.

The Federal Next of Kin bill is now in Congress and would ensure that hospitals make a reasonable effort to contact unconscious patients' next of kin within 24 hours.

Next: The federal bill and carrying ID

Caregiving: ID and contacting next of kin

By Alex Cukan
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Part 2 of 2.

It happened during Sept. 11, 2001, and it's happening again in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: family members using photographs pasted on a wall or showing photographs on television in a desperate attempt to find a loved one.

In any kind of disaster, phone lines -- if they work -- become overwhelmed and often impossible to use. Phone companies and the American Red Cross often provide satellite trucks for people to make brief phone calls to relatives, but physically checking on relatives is something neither the Red Cross nor law-enforcement officials have the capability to do in the aftermath of a disaster.

One non-profit organization, the National Next of Kin Registry, at nokr.org, aims to change that. Nokr.org intends to register the next-of-kin information of some 50 million Americans so law-enforcement agencies can access a password-protected secure Web site and inform the intended family member directly if something should happen with the registrant.

While a driver's license, passport or identification card can identify an injured, ill or deceased person, they often have no contact information. Nokr.org registrants receive a decal that can be affixed to driver's licenses that tells police agencies to access emergency contact information via the Web site, nokr.org founder Mark Cerney told UPI's Caregiving.

But people don't have to register next-of-kin information; they can always carry it with them. Some 1 million people arrive unconscious upon arrival at U.S. hospital emergency rooms annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, and many do not have identification -- some are children, some are joggers, some are elderly with dementia and some may have simply gone for a walk, fell or got hit by a car.

"There's a reason the unexpected is called the unexpected," said Tim Ouellette, co-founder of shoewallet.com, which makes wallets that fit in a shoe. "The emergency room statistics on people who arrive as a John or Jane Doe every year, with no information regarding medical conditions, blood type, allergies are absolutely staggering."

Shoewallet.com originally came up with the product for runners -- especially those who compete in marathons -- to store a key, identification, cash and maybe a credit card during a race, co-founder S. Brian Ouellette told Caregiving.

"But we found anyone who is on the road or trails needs a convenient place to carry ID and/or medical information at all times -- it's designed to take a beating and be waterproof," S. Brian Ouellette said. "I've tested it in all kinds of weather and in races and it doesn't come off and most people forget it's attached to their sneakers." For a limited time half of the purchase price of Shoewallets go to support NOKEP and NOKR. To purchase a shoewallet, go to <http://www.collegestuf.com/missinglink.pdf>

There are other ways to carry identification, but the important thing is that people carry ID on their person. Hurricane Katrina demonstrates families can get separated and in an emergency wallets and purses can be left behind or lost.

"If only some of the people in the Gulf Coast had Shoewallets on them, or if the bodies had them it would make identification easier so at least family members would know what happened," Laura Greenwald told Caregiving.

Greenwald was not informed her grandmother, 71-year-old Elaine Sullivan, had been admitted to a hospital even though the hospital had next-of-kin information.

"Not only would our family have been able to be with her, we would have demanded that she be fed, that her insulin and other medications be given, and her wound and infection treated," Greenwald said.

Greenwald and her mother, Janet, have been the force behind laws approved in California and Illinois to require hospitals to inform next of kin. They also have developed a kit -- Seven Steps to Successful Notification Kit at www.nokep.org -- that is available free to healthcare professionals. And for a free list of tips you can use to safeguard you and your family in the

event of a medical emergency, natural or other disaster, go to <http://www.nokep.org/fmp.htm>
The Greenwalds hope Congress will pass a measure similar to the California and Illinois laws. A bill introduced in the House, H.R. 2560 or the "Elaine Sullivan Act," is designed to protect patients who are brought into a hospital unconscious or physically unable to give informed consent by ensuring emergency-department personnel make a reasonable effort to contact next of kin within 24 hours.

"Most hospitals notify the next of kin of unconscious emergency room arrivals relatively quickly; however, emergency rooms are extremely high-pressured, intense and sometime chaotic environments," said bill sponsor Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Ill. "In the hustle and bustle of the ER, despite the dedication and professionalism of staff, there are real risks that a simple phone call may not be made in a timely fashion."

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