

# Patient Privacy

Category: Behind Closed Doors

written by Jill Rovitzky Black | April 6, 2021

With a crisp gesture, sharp as the crack of a whip, the nurse sends the curtain rings skittering along the track, separating the bed on one side of the room from the other. The doctor does it more sedately, pulling the curtain along as if walking an aging dog, chatting to calm an anxious patient as she does. Either way, the object seems to be patient privacy.

Even when the curtains are drawn tightly enough to prevent a sliver of a glimpse of the person within, the task inevitably fails. There can be no real privacy when a few squares of linoleum and a few yards of fabric separate one bed from its neighbor. Without distance or density to muffle sounds, a discrete murmur directed to one patient easily reaches another.

As someone who has spent a few nights in a hospital bed, am I dismayed or outraged that patient privacy is a polite illusion? In theory, perhaps. In reality: *Hell no.*

The tedium of confinement sharpens the appetite for distraction, and hospital stories can be particularly tasty. I've heard police question a woman about how she landed one bed over from me. Turns out, a would-be boyfriend, spurned and angry, bided his time at the restaurant where she tended bar, then chased her on her drive home, forcing her car into an embankment. During another hospital stay, the woman on the other side of the curtain was desperate to leave the hospital so she could deposit the government assistance check waiting in her mailbox. A delay, she told the nurse (and unwittingly, me), might suggest that she had unreported means, thereby triggering a reduction or suspension of her benefits.

HIPPA aside, we're all taught early on that eavesdropping is bad, but it's unavoidable in a hospital where those mesh borders crowning the drapery let words glide through like fish in water. Still, I'm on slippery moral ground if I plead that my hunger for diversion drove me to harvest others' lives as fodder for my own entertainment.

Call it not entertainment but enlightenment, then. What I overheard opened my eyes and my heart, weaving spider-silk strands of connection between my very temporary roommates and me. Our passively traded stories—they had to have heard mine in the same way I heard theirs—fostered a compassion that wouldn't exist with better soundproofing or tightly closed doors.

*Jill Rovitzky Black*  
*Nyack, New York*