

Family and Caregiver Presence Policies:  
COVID-19 and Novel Approaches to support Family and Caregiver Presence and  
Partnership

CFHI is hosting a series of webinars to explore **Patient Partnership in a Time of COVID-19** and facilitate pan-Canadian conversations about patient engagement during this time of pandemic. The discussion webinars bring a patient partnership lens to specific and emerging issues, policies and practices that are rapidly developing and being implemented in response to COVID-19. These issues have direct impact on patients, families and caregivers with implications on the quality and safety for both those receiving and delivering care. Our aim is to provide a place for discussion about these critical issues and for participants to share and learn from each as they respond to the evolving pandemic.

On April 16, 2020, CFHI hosted a webinar discussion with members from the National Health Engagement Network about **Family and Caregiver Presence Policies and Practices: COVID-19 and Looking to the Future**.

During this conversation, patient engagement leaders and patient and family partners from across Canada shared new approaches to facilitate engagement. Participants also shared how their organizations are working to welcome family and caregivers as partners in care during the time of COVID-19. Finding a balance between the importance of care that focuses on the needs and priorities of patients, families and caregivers, and providers, and the imperative for safety and infection control during this time of pandemic is crucial.

In our conversation, many key practices emerged to support ongoing family and caregiver presence as partners in care:

**Technology as an enabler for continued connection**

Technology has emerged as an enabler for continued connection and involvement of families and caregivers within the circle of care. With restrictions on open family presence policies, technology supported family presence includes:

- Use of iPads and tablets, conference call technology such as Zoom or Skype to support face-to-face interaction between patients and families.
- Integrated Bedside Technology has also been adapted to allow for Skype opportunities between patients and their families and caregivers
- Patient Education Librarians are providing virtual consultation and access to materials for families and caregivers

**Creating structures that support connection**

- Nurses and healthcare professionals are designating time or creating scheduled calls to provide updates to families and caregivers over the phone

- Scheduling families/caregiver attendance (via virtual means or teleconferences) at interprofessional ICU rounding
- New roles have been developed to support communication with families and caregivers, facilitating virtual visits with loved ones, and offering family support

#### Communicating Change with Families and Caregivers

Communication is crucial to support and preserve relationships with patients, families and caregivers.

- Work with existing patient partners to create and share messaging with families and caregivers regarding policy changes, how this will impact them and their loved ones, and how organizations will continue to support family presence in care through the different approaches
- Provide information related to local community supports where family caregivers can access food and beverages, and a place to wait if they are unable to accompany their loved one into the hospital
- Hospital leaders host virtual townhalls to communicate with communities, families and caregivers about policy changes, providing updates on the work being done within the organizations in response of the pandemic, and creating an opportunity for questions and dialogue

#### Create Opportunities for Safe Family Presence Practices through Education and Training

In some institutions, one to two designated family members and caregivers are specifically identified as essential partners in care and are able to continue to support their loved one in person. In order to ensure continued presence of family and caregivers at bedsides, family members and caregivers are provided with information and training that support safe participation:

- Provide information and/or training for family and caregivers in infection control practices as they enter the healthcare institution.
- Implement screening processes, similar to staff, for family/caregivers as they enter the healthcare institution.

In addition to these key practices, webinar participants also shared areas of concern that need further considerations from hospitals when they are examining their policies. Many providers may be finding these times challenging, as they are unable to provide care in partnership with families and caregivers, and patients, families and caregivers may be experiencing adverse mental health effects when they are unable to remain connected to their loved ones. Participants emphasized it was crucial to the hospitals to re-examine how they are distinguishing between visitors and essential partners in care. Other areas identified for further consideration are:

- The need to re-examine current restrictive policies and create distinctions between essential partners in care and visitors, and returning to patient and family-centred language. Examples can be taken from the areas where hospitals have carefully made this distinction, such as pediatrics, labour and delivery, and end of life care.

- The short, medium and long-term mental health effects and trauma on patients, families, caregivers and those delivering care.
- Continue to examine alternative methods of engagement by learning from other organizations. For example, Patient Relations Departments may be experiencing increased contact by families seeking status updates, thus providing a new mechanism through which families may be updated and included while restrictions are in place.
- Explore what opportunities exist to re-engage care partners using a staged process.
- Consider how patient experience, patient safety, and patient outcomes may be affected through these periods of restriction.

As this pandemic continues to evolve and resolve, it remains crucial for hospitals to continue to re-examine and re-calibrate their current patient and family centred/partnered policies, to consider how they will continue to engage with patients, families and caregivers during the time of COVID-19. For more information on future webinars on “Patient Partnership during this time of Covid-19”, visit the [CFHI Website](#) for more details.