EMS Standard Operating Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Title:</th>
<th>Media Relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section:</td>
<td>Staff SOG’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption Date:</td>
<td>05/19/2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Most Recent Update:</td>
<td>01/01/2004, 04/18/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAAS Criteria Reference:</td>
<td>105.03.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Purpose:

To prevent the inappropriate release of confidential patient information and other confidential Company information to the media, and to ensure a consistent approach to media relations.

Policy:

As a general rule, only designated personnel may contact and/or speak with the media or release information to members of the media. All personnel shall refer any media requests for information to the Assistant Chief or Chief.

1. General Guidelines for Media Interactions

- Personnel may from time to time, receive media inquiries from various news/media agencies, including:
  - Newspapers and television stations, for reporting a rescue, accident response, fatality, or reporting on EMS activity, or general coverage of EMS.
  - Magazines or periodicals, interviewing personnel related to incidents or general EMS issues of interest to the public.

- When contacted by the media you must notify management with general information about the nature of the request and contact information for the reporter/writer.
• All communication with the media must be approved by management. When approved, personnel may discuss general topics of interest and ambulance and EMS related issues with the media.

• In the event of a death, refer inquiries to the Polk County Medical Examiner’s office.
  - 286-2102
  - 286-3333 - After-hours

• The Assistant Chief will serve as the department's primary PIO, others may be appointed at the discretion of the Senior Command Staff.

• Photographs used for clinical purposes shall become a part of the patient’s medical record.

2. Non-Patient or Organization Specific Interactions.

• In talking with the media about non-patient or organization specific issues, all personnel should follow the following guidelines:

  • Refrain from giving an "off the record" comment. Never consider any comment as "off the record". The following types of information should NEVER be released:

    • Patient-specific information, including names, addresses, assessment of injuries, treatment provided, and history/diagnosis. As a covered entity, we are bound by HIPAA to preserve patient confidentiality. Release of patient-specific information to the media is not permitted.
    • Information that may be prejudicial to law enforcement investigations (e.g. “I think the driver that caused the accident was drinking alcohol”).
    • Information that is not known for certain such as subjective or your “opinion” (e.g. “The car must have been speeding at the time of the accident”).
    • Information that may be an invasion of privacy, such as suicide information, AIDS status, overdose, psychiatric transport, cause of death.

• Personnel are encouraged to respond to requests for media interviews to discuss your job, your role as an EMT, and your experiences at West Des Moines EMS. As long as patient information is not discussed, the department and City are not placed in a negative light, and confidential business information is not released, such interviews will generally be approved and permitted.
In any situation where an interview becomes uncomfortable, you are free to stop it at any time. You are not required to talk to members of the media. You are also free to completely refrain from speaking to the media about any topic at all.

3. Organization Specific Interactions

We must balance providing the public with information about the services we provide against the individual rights of the patient to keep their medical information confidential. We fully respect the right of the public to know about our activities as we are a public agency subject to public scrutiny. But we can provide information to the public only to the extent that the law allows us.

Personnel must refer all media inquiries to the Assistant Chief or Chief. Doing so helps assure that appropriate information is released and our public image is maintained.

4. Dealing with Media Requests for Patient Information

- General information about a response may be released, provided that patient identifying information is not offered. For example, acceptable releases include:
  - NAME OF HOSPITAL: You may provide the name of the hospital to which patients have been transported. (Acceptable Example: The media calls about “the accident at Third and Main earlier this afternoon.” You may inform the media “A patient was transported from the accident scene to County General Hospital.”). **THE NAME OF THE PATIENT SHOULD NOT BE RELEASED TO THE MEDIA.** It is not appropriate for us to confirm or deny the identity of a patient. Requests for patient identity should be directed to a law enforcement agency or to the hospital. Law enforcement agencies are not subject to the strict requirements of protecting patient information as we are under HIPAA.
  - NUMBER OF PATIENTS: You may provide the total number of patients involved in an accident or transported to a facility. You may not indicate specifics about the vehicle a patient was driving or which patient went to a particular facility. (Acceptable Example: You may inform the media that “Four patients were transported from the fire at the XYZ Chemical Factory. Two were taken to Mercy Hospital and two were taken to the Iowa Methodist Medical Center.”)
  - AGE & GENDER: You may provide the age of a patient and the gender of the patient, unless it could reasonably be used to identify the patient. (Acceptable Example: You may inform the media “a 39
y/o male was transported from the accident on the Interstate.” You would not want to disclose to the media “A 39 y/o male was transported from 123 Vine St.” since this information can be used to determine the identity of the patient.)

- DESIGNATION OF CREW MEMBERS: The designation of crew members as paramedics or EMTs is not protected health information. You may state, for example, that one paramedic and two EMTs were involved in caring for the patients involved in a motor vehicle accident. (You should not identify the names of the personnel who responded. You are not permitted to describe the specific type of care rendered to patients at the scene or on the way to the hospital. Nor may you speculate on what injuries a patient may or may not have sustained. (Acceptable Example: “Personnel on the scene of the incident included two paramedics and a supervisor and advanced life support was administered.”)

- TYPE OF TRANSPORT: You may indicate that a particular call was an emergency and that transportation was facilitated by ambulance or helicopter. Do not speculate on the patient’s condition even if you are sure of that condition. (Acceptable Example: “Of the 3 patients on the scene of the incident, one was transported by helicopter to Iowa Methodist Medical Center and two were transported as non-emergency patients to Mercy Hospital's emergency department.”)

- NON-PATIENT HEALTH INFORMATION: Information that is not classified as PHI may be released to the media consistent with policy and state law. For instance, information about a fire response or a standby that did not involve patient care may be released to the media, as may general information about an event. (Acceptable Example: “We treated 45 patients during the two-day festival, and 6 were transported to local hospitals for various heat-related complaints”).

- DISCLOSURES AUTHORIZED BY THE PATIENT: In the event that the patient or the patient’s legally responsible decision maker signs a HIPAA authorization form, disclosures of information, including PHI, may be made so long as they are done in accordance with the express terms of the written authorization. Authorization forms for this purpose must be HIPAA-compliant and must be approved by the Chief.

- If at any time you are unclear about whether information may be disclosed to the media, always error on the side of caution and do not disclose.