

Compassion Continued

framework of ethical principles while recognizing that answers will not come easily.

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Dear Mary Continued

self, especially when the nurses are not sure how far they can — or should — go to protect the patient. Striking a balance between the patient's rights and the nurse's responsibility can be a difficult task. I have referred your question to Barbara F. Katz, a member of *NLE's* Editorial Advisory Board and a hospital attorney.

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A competent adult patient has the right to leave the hospital at any time he chooses. Attempts to restrain the patient against his will can form the basis for liability for false imprisonment. Following a patient after he has left the hospital is inappropriate. If it is the opinion of the hospital staff that the patient should not leave, he may be requested to sign a form indicating that he is leaving against medical advice. However, he cannot be required to sign the form, and he may still leave even if he refuses to sign.

It may be, however, that this particular patient is incompetent. If so, there

NLE

NURSING LAW & ETHICS

520 Commonwealth Ave.
Boston, MA 02215

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may be other steps you could take. All states have statutes which permit the involuntary commitment of a mentally ill individual under certain circumstances. Generally one of those circumstances is if the mentally ill person is dangerous to himself, or suicidal. Accordingly, if the patient in question met these statutory criteria, an appropriate response would be to have the patient involuntarily committed. This process may be completed very quickly when necessary.

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