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Communicating Test Results to Patients

Q: My physician prefers not to discuss abnormal test results with our patients. He communicates the information and instructions to me, his medical assistant, and I call the patient and relay the information. Is this appropriate?

A: The answer is a simple no. A physician should not delegate to the MA his/her responsibility to discuss test results or to follow-up on phone calls. This should be done by the physician and documented in the medical record. The physician is best able to discuss treatment options and answer questions the patient may have.

The exception to this **may** be to allow the medical assistant to notify the patient when test results are normal and there are **no instructions** for follow-up.

Q: Is it okay to e-mail laboratory test results to patients who request them electronically?

A: California law allows a physician to communicate laboratory test results by electronic means (including e-mail) if the following guidelines are followed:

- The patient has provided his/her consent to receive laboratory results by electronic means and has been advised he/she may call for more explanation, if desired;
- The results are provided in a reasonable time but only after the physician (or health care professional) has reviewed the results;
- A secure personal identification number is given for access if results are posted on an electronic site;
- Test results are conveyed in plain language;
- The patient is advised of any additional charges connected with the electronic delivery of the test results.

The following tests results **may not** be conveyed electronically:

- HIV antibody test,
- Presence of antigens indicating a hepatitis infection,
- Drug abuse,
- Test results related to routinely processed tissues, (skin biopsies, Pap smears, products of conception, and bone marrow aspirations for morphological evaluation,) if they reveal a malignancy.

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