British Hospitals: No Sitting

Maria Cheng, AP

Britons trying to cheer up their hospitalized friends and relatives often have to do so standing up - sitting on the bed usually isn't allowed.

In a commentary published Wednesday in the British medical journal *BMJ*, Dr. Iona Heath argues the recommendation is unjustified and denies patients the chance to be close to their loved ones. British authorities claim the ban on sitting is needed to prevent patients from getting infected by visitors and health care staff.

"Don't be tempted to sit on the patient's bed," warns the Peninsula National Health Service Treatment Centre in Devon in guidance on its website. Hospitals throughout Britain have similar advice, in addition to banning fresh flowers. "I was shocked when I heard about it," Heath said of the sitting ban. Heath said she would definitely sit on a patient's bed if she was making a house call or in the hospital. "Doctors should never be discouraged from sitting, because patients consistently estimate that they have been given more time when the doctor sits down," Heath wrote in the commentary. "Such interactions are precious and should be made easier rather than more difficult."

Britain's department of health said the bans on sitting and flowers are determined by individual hospitals. "It is considered good practice by some (hospitals) that visitors and staff should not sit on beds, in order to reduce the risk of transmitting infections from one patient to the next," the agency said. "Patients with MRSA, for example, may shed contaminated skin onto the bed and this could be picked up and transmitted to someone else."

"Whilst any link between cut flowers and infections is small, some hospitals may choose to ban them from wards where patients have their immunity to infection severely reduced," the Department of Health said. David Bates, a professor of medicine at Harvard University who also directs a group studying patient safety at the World Health Organization, said he wasn't aware of any evidence that suggests preventing people from sitting on beds or banning fresh flowers results in lower infection rates.

Bates said hospitals should focus on proven methods to stop infections, like using antibiotics appropriately and hand-washing.

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