

Letter to Families: The Communication Process



Thank you for choosing Sunshine Coast Health Centre to help your loved one with their addiction issues. We appreciate that you are likely very concerned about how your loved one is doing while with us at SCHC. We know that many family members are eager to speak with the counsellors, psychiatrist, nurses, and physician.

This letter will help you understand:

1. What communication you can expect from SCHC staff
2. What types of information are protected

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

- Our family counsellor will contact you and update you on your loved one's primary counsellor. Although you may interact with your loved one's primary counsellor occasionally, you will primarily work with the family counsellor.
- The family counsellor will address questions and concerns you have throughout the treatment period. The family counsellor will also update your loved one's primary counsellor on all of your concerns. He will also go over SCHC's Family Program with you.
- If you're interested in attending our Family Program, a clinical assistant will contact you regarding registration and client consents.
- To speak with one of our family program facilitators, email familyprogram@schc.ca or phone 604-487-9050 ext. 205.

UNDERSTANDING WHY SCHC FOLLOWS THIS COMMUNICATION PROCESS

SCHC's clinical and medical staff members must follow the laws and policies of the Government of British Columbia, healthcare codes of ethics, and the professional associations to which they belong.

Among all of these regulations and guidelines are strict rules about who is and who is not entitled to a client's *protected personal information*.

PROTECTED PERSONAL INFORMATION

Some examples of protected personal information of clients who seek professional healthcare include:

1. Physical and psychiatric diagnoses
2. Medications prescribed (if applicable)
3. Reports and clinical notes
4. Recommendations for further testing
5. Disclosures in assessments or therapy, and
6. Certain details in the therapeutic process.

According to these laws, codes of ethics, and policies, even the funder is not entitled to a client's protected personal information.

Of course, there may be times when it is important for families to have a better understanding of their loved one's condition. For example, perhaps the clinical team discovers a client has dementia and needs help making decisions. In this case, we decide if it's in the client's best interest to inform a family member of the new diagnosis. Cases like this are exceptional.

CLIENT'S WRITTEN PERMISSION

When a client gives us written permission to speak with his family, this does not mean that we can reveal his protected personal information. It does mean that we can discuss, for example, whether the client is still at SCHC, his general progress, and certain recommendations to support him in his life after treatment.

On rare occasions, a client does not give us permission to talk to families. While we do work with the client to understand why he refused consent, we are obligated to adhere to his wishes. Although it is difficult for families and SCHC staff, we are obligated to avoid contact. For example, if you were to call us, we would reply, "I'm sorry but I can neither confirm or deny that such person is here." In this case, you are free to contact your loved one through your own means about providing us with permission.

Other professionals who provide care to your loved one, such as a psychiatrist in his hometown, may benefit from knowing the clinical details of the client's experience at SCHC. In this case, we follow standard practice by obtaining a signed consent to provide information to the specific professional.

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OBLIGATIONS OF PRIMARY COUNSELLOR

Your loved one's primary counsellor at SCHC will develop what we call a "therapeutic relationship" with the client. This relationship is so important in psychotherapy that it is also protected by the laws of British Columbia and by the healthcare code of ethics. The purpose of protecting the relationship is to help your loved one feel free to disclose emotionally charged feelings and issues, without having to worry that we will tell friends, employers, and family. Trust is essential.

Under the healthcare codes of ethics, our primary counsellors see their client as his or her primary responsibility, including protecting his confidentiality. As a result, there is an obvious distinction between how they work with clients and how they work with family members.

SCHC COUNSELLORS AND THE FAMILY

SCHC has dedicated facilitators and coordinators for the families of its clients. Please communicate any concerns, comments, and questions to them at familyprogram@schc.ca or 604-487-9050 ext. 205.

PHYSICIAN AND PSYCHIATRIST

Our physician and psychiatrist do not routinely communicate directly with families.