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Visitors asked to show ID at Grand Strand Regional, other SC hospitals

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MYRTLE BEACH — Recent visitors to see patients at Grand Strand Regional Medical Center are finding they must show identification, pose for a photo and inform security of their destination before proceeding into the facility.

While not the first in the state to implement a "visitor management program," as it's called at Grand Strand, the hospital is one of the first nearby to do so.

"We might be a little bit ahead of the curve in this area, but we're one of the largest employers in the area," Grand Strand spokeswoman Joan Carroza said. Carroza said the hospital employs 1,300 people.

Shalama Jackson, spokeswoman with the S.C. Hospital Association, said facilities such as Medical University of South Carolina and Greenville Memorial Hospital have similar practices in place.

"What's happening at Grand Strand is not a unique situation in the state," Jackson said. "Hospitals in the state have taken steps to add or enhance security on their [properties]. They haven't had any major incidents, but it's for the patients' protection — and the visitors'."

When asked about visitation procedures in place at other area hospitals, representatives from Conway Medical Center and McLeod Loris Seacoast said they have no security practices in place for visitors.

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Grand Strand Regional Medical Center security officer, Cpl. Kyle Guierrez greets Betty Hunter and takes her drivers license to scan in the new visitor management system that creates a photo ID badge for every person entering the facility. Since starting the system they have averaged over 900 visitors a day.
CHARLES SLATE — cslate@thesunnews.com Buy Photo

Christy Ailsbrook said that at Seacoast visitors can stop at an information booth before heading to a patient's room during visiting hours. Jenna Cox, spokeswoman at Seacoast, said the hospital is evaluating the procedures for standardized visitation to determine if restrictions if necessary.

"We don't have a system like [Grand Strand] in place," said Conway Medical Center spokeswoman Julie Rajotte. "We haven't found a need to do that."

Representatives from Grand Strand, Seacoast and Conway all pointed to the benefit of visitors being allowed to see patients when they're in the hospital.

"Having visitors can be a healing thing," Rajotte said.

Lisa Pryce, president of the International Association for Healthcare Security and Safety, said that since Sept. 11, 2001, hospitals have slowly begun adopting varying forms of visitor management systems.

"After 9/11 a lot of hospitals started to figure out how to have better accounting of who's in the hospital," Pryce said. "It's definitely becoming more and more popular."

And Carroza said hospitals aren't the only facilities that have similar security practices in place.

"It's not a new thing for buildings where there are a lot of people," she said. "Many schools use a program that is similar."

Since Aug. 13, when a visitor enters one of the three designated entrances at Grand Strand — the main lobby, the emergency department and the heart center — during visiting hours they must show and show a security staff member their government-issued identification. Security staff will take a photograph of the visitor and ask their destination.

The visitor will be issued a badge with their photo, name and destination, as well as the date, printed on it. Children under age 16 are not photographed, must be accompanied by an adult and receive a copy of the adult's badge. Visitor information is stored and return visitors need only give their name and destination when they go back to the hospital.

Before the program was put in place, visitors were able to walk into any of the doors at the hospital and proceed to patients' rooms, Carroza said.

"Some would stop at the information desk if they needed help, but otherwise they'd just walk in," she said.

Carroza said the change did not stem from a single incident and was part of ongoing conversations around safety and security at the hospital.

"The main thing is we need to make sure people have a reason to be here," she said. "They're either here for a procedure or they're visiting something. ... This is not a place to hang out because the weather is bad."

Carroza said knowing that they will have to show identification also serves as a deterrent to people who don't have a reason to be at the hospital.

Carroza said the transition went smoothly and there had been only six complaints in the first two weeks of the new procedures. She said the hospital averaged about 1,000 visitors during the first week the system was in place. The facility is licensed for 269 in-patients, with many more receiving same-day treatment.

"I have been amazed at how patient people have been," she said. "It seems to be a quick process. Most people have their IDs on them."

Sonny and Carolyn Clardy used the new visitor program for the first time Aug. 28 to visit their granddaughter who was expected to be born that day.

"It's wonderful that the hospital is being proactive," Sonny Clardy said. "I think it's sad we're in a society where we need to come to this, but it's good to [focus on] the safety and well being of the public."

Carolyn Clardy said some people are at their most vulnerable when they're in a hospital.

"Family's don't have to worry about people who have no business being here," she said. "They know there won't be people roaming the halls and going in and out of rooms."

Jackson, with the hospital association, said the organization has not taken a stance on suggesting other hospitals in the state implement similar procedures, saying the decision is up to the administration of each facility.

Carroza noted that some who visit the hospital may not have government-issued identification and said the issue would be addressed if and when it happened.

"We wouldn't keep a great-grandparent from seeing their great-grandchild," she said.

Visiting hours at Grand Strand are from 5:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. daily in the main lobby and the heart center, and 24 hours in the emergency department. Those seeking treatment in the emergency room will not be required to show identification.

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