

# Catholic Courier

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## New privacy rule scrambles visitation routines

Pastoral visitation of the sick isn't quite as simple as it used to be, Father Leo Reinhardt observed.

"I had nurses who were parishioners. One of them would call and say 'This person is having a difficult time.' That couldn't happen now," said Father Reinhardt, pastor of Ithaca's Immaculate Conception Parish.

Meanwhile, Father Winfried Kellner, assisting priest at Our Mother of Sorrows in Greece, said he recently called a nursing home to see how a severely ill woman, who had been visited frequently by parish staff members, was doing. He was informed that no details could be released.

Such situations are becoming more frequent since a privacy rule took effect April 14 as part of the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). The rule, which serves to safeguard patients' personal health information, has greatly altered the way in which health-care facilities can furnish those details:

- Name, room number and general medical condition ("fair," "critical," etc.) will only be released if patients, or their loved ones, have given written or oral consent. Patients who have not given consent will be withheld from the directory, and any inquiries about those patients cannot be addressed by health-care facility staff.

- Visitors must ask for patients by name. The only exception is for parish staff, including priests — but even then, names will only be released if patients have con-



James Russi, a parishioner of Rochester's St. Boniface Church, is blessed by his pastor, Father Richard Brickler, who visited him July 7 at Highland Hospital.

sented to visitation and specified their faith community. Prior to HIPAA, parish staff could simply view a directory.

- Patient information given over the phone has been curtailed. Only with prior consent can health-care institutions call parishes to inform them of patients' desire for pastoral care, including the sacrament of the sick. In addition, no names can be given over the phone — so parishes can no longer call to find out what parishioners are in the

hospital.

"It's clear that the clergy are having more problems as the hospitals are taking steps to do what they believe is necessary," said Deacon John Nelson, diocesan coordinator of health-care ministry. "The routine is being changed, there's absolutely no question. There's a lot of scrambling, and there's going to be more scrambling."

### CAUTION KICKS IN

HIPAA, administered and

enforced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, affects all types of health-care entities — hospitals, nursing homes, physician's offices and insurance carriers among them. HIPAA was passed by Congress in 1996, in part to bring about smoother electronic transmittal of individuals' health data when they changed insurance carriers. The privacy act later emerged largely to safeguard individuals' health data

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Story by Mike Latona • Photo by Karin von Voigtlander

