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Hospital Workers Punished for Peeking at Clooney File

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[George Clooney](#) and his companion got top billing when they were treated at a [New Jersey](#) hospital after a motorcycle accident last month. But while some nurses clamored to see the celebrity patients, other staff members were busy prying into the couple's medical records, hospital officials said yesterday.

That curiosity proved to be costly. After an internal investigation, the hospital, Palisades Medical Center in North Bergen, has suspended 27 employees for a month without pay for violating a federal law on patient confidentiality.

"They were severely disciplined," said a hospital spokesman, Eurice Rojas, confirming a report broadcast yesterday on WCBS-TV.

The motorcycle accident received widespread and immediate media coverage. It was unclear how the news got out, and the hospital would not discuss the matter.

Neither Mr. Clooney, 46, nor his companion, Sarah Larson, 28, complained about the disclosures of their injuries to reporters, and they did not seek to have anyone punished, said a spokesman for the actor, Stan Rosenfield.

In a statement, Mr. Clooney said, "While I very much believe in a patient's right to privacy, I would hope that this could be settled without suspending medical workers."

Outside the hospital, on the banks of the Hudson River across from the Upper West Side of Manhattan, several employees declined to comment about the situation last night.

But Jeanne Otersen, a spokeswoman for the Health Professionals and Allied Employees union, denounced the suspensions as "an overreaction" and said the group would fight to reduce the penalties. The union, which represents seven suspended nurses, said the nurses had looked at the records but did not divulge the contents, Ms. Otersen said.

The hospital workers are accused of violating the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, which restricts access to patient medical information.

Ms. Otersen said the hospital imposed excessively harsh sanctions because of Mr. Clooney's fame. She also faulted the hospital for inadequate privacy protections, given "the fact that this was such a large breach."

Mr. Clooney and Ms. Larson were hospitalized on Sept. 21 after Mr. Clooney, driving a Harley-Davidson on Boulevard East in Weehawken with Ms. Larson as his passenger, tried to pass a 1999 Mazda Millenia on the right, the authorities have said. The Mazda swerved and struck him, Mr. Rosenfield said.

Mr. Clooney suffered a hairline fracture to a rib and “road rash,” and Ms. Larson suffered multiple foot fractures, Mr. Rosenfield said.

Mr. Rosenfield said he checked with Mr. Clooney after the accident, and the actor told him he had no plan to issue a statement about it. But Mr. Rosenfield said that within three hours, he received an e-mail message from a pop culture magazine saying, “We have information that George Clooney is in Palisades Medical Center” after a motorcycle accident and is “suffering from road rash.”

Mr. Rosenfield said he was surprised because the message “pinpointed where he was,” and “they knew some of the extent of the injuries.” He added, “I figured, ‘O.K, somebody’s been talking to somebody.’”

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