



EVALUATION OF PERSONS THAT SIGNED THE SIGNED AGAINST MEDICAL ADVICE FORM AT THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT OF A NIGERIAN TEACHING HOSPITAL

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Abstract

Background: One of the ethical principles of medicine is autonomy which allows the patient to take any decision they wish to concern their health whether it is beneficial or detrimental. One such decision that will enable patients to exhibit the ethical principle of autonomy is when they decide to discharge themselves against medical advice. Usually, health facilities have a form that patients or their caregivers must append their signatures when they decide to Sign against Medical Advice (SAMA). It becomes an ethical dilemma on who has the attorney to sign the SAMA form.

Method: This is a cross-sectional study conducted at the Emergency Department (ED) of the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital to ascertain the person who signs the SAMA form.

Results: There were more males 361(52.5%) in this study than females and most of the patients that SAMA were conscious 655(95.3%) while 32(4.7%) were unconscious. Some of the patients refused to sign the SAMA form 138(20%). The majority of the persons that signed the SAMA somewhere not related to the patient.

Conclusion: In Nigeria, due to the extended family system and communal style of living some persons that sign the SAMA form are not related to the patient. This puts the physician and the person who signed the SAMA form at risk of litigation.

Key Word: Autonomy, Ethical Considerations, Discharge, Medical Advice

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INTRODUCTION

Some principles guide the practice of medicine. One of which is the ethical principle of autonomy which gives patients the liberty to make their decisions concerning their health whether it is positive or detrimental to their health. One such negative decision that patients and their caregivers sometimes make is when they decide to leave the health facility before they are certified fit and due for discharge by the attending physician. There is no obligation that patients and their caregivers sometimes take when they decide to leave the health facility before they are certified fit and for discharge by the attending physician. There is no obligation that a patient must adhere to the instructions of a health worker. What is important is that they must be properly counselled in simple language concerning their actions¹. When patients decide to sign against medical advice (SAMA) they pose a risk to themselves as the illness may worsen and can get readmitted, at other times they can even die^{2,3}. When patients discharge themselves against medical advice, it may lead to emotional feelings to the physical⁴. This is worse in the emergency department if the patient has been resuscitated and the patient now perceives that since the clinical condition has improved and maybe the symptoms have regressed. Following the patient charter and human rights, discontinuation of treatment is the right of a patient.⁵ In a study conducted at the Federal Medical Centre, Bida located in northern Nigeria 3.9% of patients that SAMA were readmitted⁶. SAMA occurs worldwide in both developed and developing countries for varied reasons⁷. The prevalence of SAMA varies in different hospitals⁹. In Nigeria, several hospital-based studies have been conducted on SAMA with different rates. It is 3.2% at the state specialist hospital, Ondo⁸; 7.4% at Federal Medical Centre, Owo¹⁰, and 3.8% among paediatric patients at Ekiti State University Teaching Hospital, Ado-Ekiti¹¹. The causes of SAMA are multifactorial¹¹. The causes of SAMA can be categorized into factors associated with the patient, hospital staff and hospital environment¹². The causes of SAMA are financial constraints, faith in traditional medicine, alternative and complementary therapy, long hospital stays, poor clinical state, not improving clinical condition, improved clinical state, refusal of blood transfusion, medical procedures and surgery especially amputation, long waiting time, dissatisfaction with the attitude of the healthcare workers, cultural and religious beliefs, prolonged hospital stay and the job of the patient and family members^{3,13}. In a study conducted in the intensive care unit of an Indian hospital, the minimum length of stay in the hospital before the decision to SAMA was taken was 2.23 ± 5.17 days.¹⁴

This study was conducted at the accident and emergency department of the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital

(UPTH) located in southern Nigeria to investigate the time spent in the ED before SAMA and the person who signed the SAMA form as it is an ethical dilemma sometimes on who has the right the sign the SAMA form. Patients who have SAMA are a source of litigation to their physicians.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a prospective cross-sectional study conducted at the Emergency Department (ED) of UPTH. Data was collected over 34 months from January 2021-September 2023. All patients that SAMA themselves were included in the study. Patients who absconded that is they did not inform any of the doctors or nurses on duty at the time they were leaving the hospital were excluded from the study. This is because they did not inform the nurses or doctors on duty about their decision. All other patients who informed the health workers about their decision to SAMA were included in the study whether they agreed to sign the SAMA form or not.

A data collection form was designed for this study. The data that was generated was entered into an Excel spreadsheet and then imported into the statistical package of social sciences before it was analyzed.

RESULTS

The number of participants in this study is 687 comprising 361(52.5%) males and 326(47.5%) females. The age ranged from 3 months to 92 years with a mean of 42.2 ± 17.9 . At the time of signing the SAMA form, 655 (95.3%) of the patients were conscious while 32(4.7%) were unconscious. Majority of the patients that SAMA 549(80.0%) signed the SAMA form while 138 (20.1%) refused to sign the SAMA when it was administered to them as shown in Figure 1.

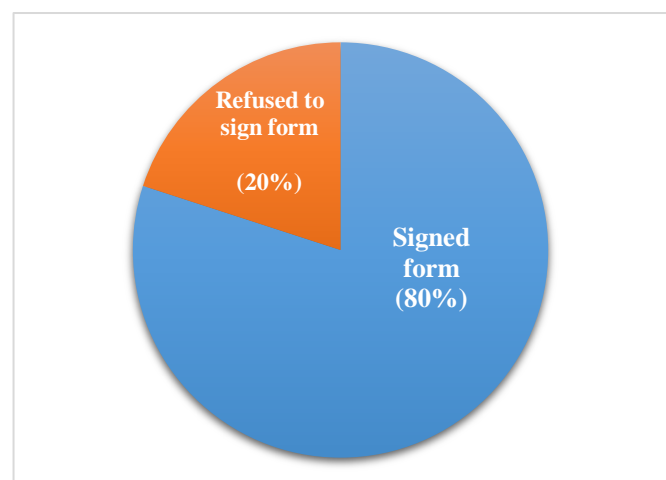


Figure 1: Signing of SAMA Form

Table 1 shows the person who signed the SAMA form. Three of the persons who signed the SAMA form were medical doctors who signed on behalf of their brother, friend and mother. A pastor signed the SAMA form for his church member in the presence of the patient’s wife.

Table 1: Person that signed the SAMA form

S/N	Person That Signed	N	%
1.	Patient	140	25.5
2.	Siblings (Brother/Sister)	108	19.7
3.	Spouse (Husband/Wife)	106	19.3
4.	Offspring (Daughter/Son)	97	17.7
5.	Parents (Father/Mother)	46	8.4
6.	Friend	9	1.6
7.	Community Brother	6	1.1
8.	Nephew/Niece	6	1.1
9.	Boss/Colleague/Employer/Master	6	1.1
10.	Brother-In-Law/Daughter-In-Law/Sister-In-Law	5	0.9
11.	Church Member/Pastor	4	0.7
12.	Daughter/Son’s Friend	3	0.5
13.	Aunt/Uncle	3	0.5
14.	Cousin	3	0.5
15.	Good Samaritan who brought the patient to the hospital	2	0.4
16.	Caretaker/Neighbour	2	0.4
17.	Refused to state relationship with patient	1	0.2
18.	Boyfriend	1	0.2
19.	Stepson	1	0.2
	Total	549	100

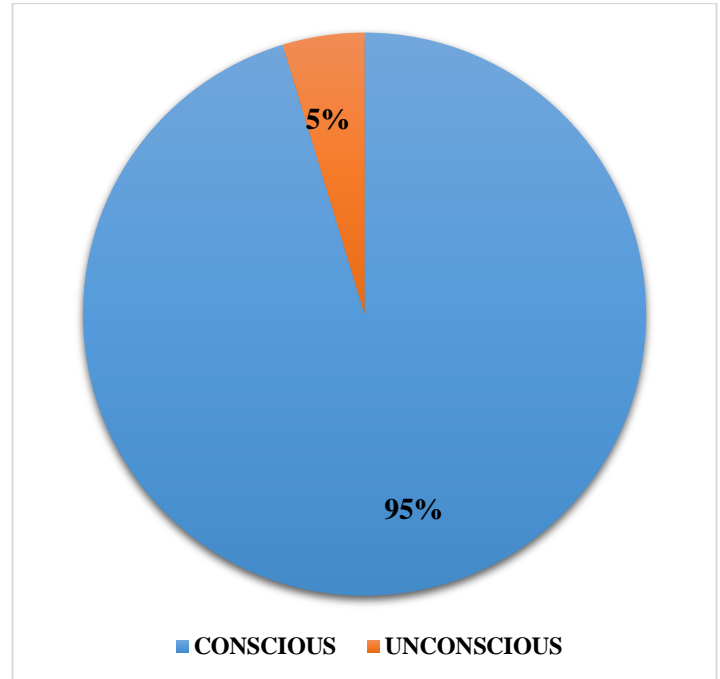


FIGURE 2: Level of consciousness at the time of SAMA

An unconscious patient whose relative signed against medicine advice and took him away was brought back to the ED four hours later dead.

DISCUSSION

Patients have the autonomy to discontinue treatment whenever they wish to once it is certified that they have a good mental capacity to decide without any cohesion. This may become an ethical dilemma when the decision of SAMA is made by someone else or puts the patient's health in danger. For instance, in this study, some of the patients who were taken away from the ED against medical advice were unconscious. That signifies that the decision to SAMA was made by a caregiver. SAMA has certain ethical dilemmas and may be a source of litigation if the decision to SAMA was not made by the patient and when the patient or the person deciding on behalf of the patient refuses to sign the SAMA form. The ED is a unit in the hospital where fast and critical decisions are made about a patient. The major goal of the ED is to attend to emergency and critical cases, resuscitate and stabilize within the shortest possible time^{15,16}. Hence resuscitation and the acute symptoms may have resolved the patients may decide to leave. Children as minors are vulnerable as the decision to SAMA was made by an adult¹⁷, especially the parents or guardian⁹. In this study, the majority of the persons did not sign the SAMA form themselves. This is similar to another Nigerian study conducted¹⁶. Even when the patient signed the SAMA form in Nigeria, it is not



a guarantee that the idea of SAMA was conceived by themselves. The influence of SAMA can be from a first-degree relative, especially for women and senior citizens¹⁸. In Nigeria, patients give their second-degree relatives and persons not related to the patient by blood or marriage to decide for them concerning their health especially if the person is funding the treatment. Spirituality affects the health of patients, especially in a country like Nigeria which is a religious one⁹. The predominant religion practiced in Rivers State where the study was conducted is Christianity. There are also African traditional religion worshippers, Muslims and followers of other religions. Hence it is not surprising that the patient allowed their pastor and church member to sign the SAMA form on their behalf. In this study, spouses were the third category of persons who signed the SAMA form. It is similar to the study conducted in Enugu¹⁶. Signing the SAMA form can also be a source of litigation against the person that signed it especially if the patient is not a relative.

Patients and their caregivers can decide to at any time. In this study, a patient can decide at the time of medical consultation once they are informed about the need to be managed as an in-patient and leave the ED. In this study, some patients left immediately after they were told about being admitted to the hospital this was the third duration of hospital stay following SAMA in this study. The results of this study are similar to the study conducted in Ondo where a majority of the patients left within one day of admission⁸.

CONCLUSION

Patients can decide to discontinue treatment at any time they wish. It is a cause of litigation for the physician and also a source of ethical dilemmas. Especially in a country like Nigeria where the extended family system is practiced with the communal way of life. Nigerian patients may allow someone else to decide on their health including signing the SAMA form. There are some ethical considerations on who actually should have the right of an attorney to sign the SAMA form. Persons signing the SAMA who are not the patient put themselves in danger as the patient or patient's family may take legal action against them.

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