



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

July 26, 2012

Mr. John C. West
OIG General Counsel
Texas Department of Criminal Justice
Office of the Inspector General
4616 West Howard Lane, Suite 250
Austin, Texas 78728

OR2012-11669

Dear Mr. West:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act (the "Act"), chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 460307.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice's Office of the Inspector General (the "department") received a request for the case file pertaining to the death of a named inmate. You state some of the requested information, including a copy of the autopsy order and the custodial death report, has been or will be released with certain addresses, telephone numbers, social security numbers, and personal family information redacted pursuant to section 552.147(b) of the Government Code, as well as the previous determination issued to the department in Open Records Letter No. 2005-01067 (2005).¹ See Code Crim. Proc. art. 49.18(b). You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.102, 552.108, and 552.134 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

¹We note section 552.147(b) of the Government Code authorizes a governmental body to redact the social security number of a living person from public release without the necessity of requesting a decision from this office under the Act. See Gov't Code § 552.147(b). We also note Open Records Letter No. 2005-01067 serves as a previous determination that the present and former home addresses and telephone numbers, social security numbers, and family member information of current or former employees of the department, regardless of whether the current or former employee complies with section 552.1175 of the Government Code, are excepted from disclosure under section 552.117(a)(3) of the Government Code.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code exempts from disclosure “information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision.” Gov’t Code § 552.101. This section encompasses the Medical Practice Act (the “MPA”), subtitle B of title 3 of the Occupations Code. *See* Occ. Code §§ 151.001-168.202. Section 159.002 of the MPA provides in part:

(b) A record of the identity, diagnosis, evaluation, or treatment of a patient by a physician that is created or maintained by a physician is confidential and privileged and may not be disclosed except as provided by this chapter.

(c) A person who receives information from a confidential communication or record as described by this chapter, other than a person listed in Section 159.004 who is acting on the patient’s behalf, may not disclose the information except to the extent that disclosure is consistent with the authorized purposes for which the information was first obtained.

Id. § 159.002(b)-(c). Information subject to the MPA includes both medical records and information obtained from those medical records. *See id.* §§ 159.002, .004; Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991). This office has concluded the protection afforded by section 159.002 extends only to records created by either a physician or someone under the supervision of a physician. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 487 (1987), 370 (1983), 343 (1982). We have also found that when a file is created as the result of a hospital stay, all the documents in the file relating to diagnosis and treatment constitute physician-patient communications or “[r]ecords of the identity, diagnosis, evaluation, or treatment of a patient by a physician that are created or maintained by a physician.” Open Records Decision No. 546 (1990). Section 159.001 of the MPA defines “patient” as a person who consults with or is seen by a physician to receive medical care. Occ. Code § 159.001(3). Under this definition, a deceased person cannot be a “patient” under section 159.002 of the MPA. Thus, the MPA is applicable only to records relating to a person who was alive at the time of the diagnosis, evaluation, or treatment to which the records pertain.

Medical records must be released upon the patient’s signed, written consent, provided the consent specifies (1) the information to be covered by the release, (2) reasons or purposes for the release, and (3) the person to whom the information is to be released. *Id.* §§ 159.004, .005. When a patient is deceased, as is the case here, medical records pertaining to the deceased patient may only be released upon the signed consent of the deceased’s personal representative. *See id.* § 159.005(a)(5). Any subsequent release of medical records must be consistent with the purposes for which the governmental body obtained the records. *See id.* § 159.002(c); Open Records Decision No. 565 at 7 (1990). Upon review, we have marked medical records and information obtained from these medical records that is confidential under the MPA. Although you raise sections 552.108 and 552.134 of the Government Code for this information, we note this office has determined that in governing access to a specific subset of information, the MPA prevails over the more general provisions in the Act. *See* ORD 598. You inform us that the department has not received a proper written consent for the release of this information. Accordingly, the

marked medical records and information obtained from these medical records must be withheld under the MPA, unless the department receives written consent for the release of this information that complies with section 159.005(a)(5) of the MPA.

Section 552.134 of the Government Code is applicable to information related to inmates of the department. Section 552.134(a) states that

[e]xcept as provided by Subsection (b) or by Section 552.029 [of the Government Code], information obtained or maintained by the [department] is excepted from [required public disclosure] if it is information about an inmate who is confined in a facility operated by or under a contract with the department.

Gov't Code § 552.134(a). Section 552.029 of the Government Code provides that

[n]otwithstanding . . . Section 552.134, the following information about an inmate who is confined in a facility operated by or under a contract with the [department] is subject to required disclosure under Section 552.021:

...

(8) basic information regarding the death of an inmate in custody, an incident involving the use of force, or an alleged crime involving the inmate.

Id. § 552.029(8). Thus, the legislature explicitly made section 552.134 subject to section 552.029. We conclude section 552.134(a) is generally applicable to the remaining information. In this instance, however, the information at issue pertains to an inmate's death in custody. Therefore, the department must release basic information about the inmate's death pursuant to section 552.029(8). The basic information that must be released includes the time and place of the incident, the names of inmates and of department employees who were involved, a brief narrative of the incident, a brief description of any injuries sustained by anyone involved, and information regarding any criminal charges or disciplinary actions that were filed as a result of the incident. Accordingly, except for basic information under section 552.029(8) of the Government Code, which you state has been or will be released, the department must withhold the remaining information under section 552.134 of the Government Code.²

²As our ruling for this information is dispositive, we need not address your remaining arguments against its release, except to note basic information under section 552.029(8) corresponds to the basic offense and arrest information that may not be withheld under section 552.108 of the Government Code. See Gov't Code § 552.108(c): *Houston Chronicle Publ'g Co. v. City of Houston*, 531 S.W.2d 177, 186-88 (Tex. Civ. App. — Houston [14th Dist.] 1975), *writ ref'd n.r.e. per curiam*, 536 S.W.2d 559 (Tex. 1976); Open Records Decision No. 127 at 3-4 (1976) (summarizing types of information deemed public by *Houston Chronicle*).

In summary, the marked medical records and information obtained from these medical records must be withheld under the MPA, unless the department receives written consent for the release of this information that complies with section 159.005(a)(5) of the MPA. With the exception of basic information under section 552.029(8) of the Government Code, which you state has been or will be released, the department may withhold the remaining information under section 552.134 of the Government Code.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular information at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other information or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For more information concerning those rights and responsibilities, please visit our website at http://www.oag.state.tx.us/open/index_orl.php, or call the Office of the Attorney General's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Act must be directed to the Cost Rules Administrator of the Office of the Attorney General, toll free at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Kenneth Leland Conyer
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

KLC/bhf

Ref: ID# 460307

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)