



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

November 19, 2003

Mr. James M. Frazier, III
Assistant General Counsel
Texas Department of Criminal Justice
P.O. Box 4004
Huntsville, Texas 77342-4004

OR2003-8307

Dear Mr. Frazier:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 191312.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (the "department") received a request for information relating to the death of a named inmate. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.108, 552.117, and 552.134 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

The submitted information includes a custodial death report. In Open Records Decision No. 521(1989), this office concluded that under article 49.18(b) of the Code of Criminal Procedure, in conjunction with a directive issued by the attorney general, section one of a custodial death report filed with this office is public information, but sections two through five of the report are confidential. *See* Code Crim. Proc. art. 49.18(b) (attorney general shall make report, with exception of any portion of report that attorney general determines is privileged, available to any interested person). Accordingly, the department must release section one of the submitted custodial death report to the requestor. However, the remaining sections of the custodial death report are confidential under article 49.18(b) of the Code of Criminal Procedure and must be withheld.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision," and

encompasses information protected by other statutes. You state that the submitted information contains medical records, access to which is governed by the Medical Practice Act, (the "MPA"), subtitle B of title 3 of the Occupations Code. Open Records Decision No. 565 at 7 (1990). Section 159.002 of the MPA provides in pertinent 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.

The MPA ordinarily encompasses only records created either by a physician or by someone acting under the supervision of a physician. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 487 (1987), 370 (1983), 343 (1982). However, when a file is created as the result of a hospital stay, this office has determined that all of the documents in the file that relate to diagnosis and treatment constitute either physician-patient communications or records of the identity, diagnosis, evaluation, or treatment of a patient by a physician, created or maintained by a physician, for purposes of the MPA. *See* Open Records Decision No. 546 (1990). Much of the submitted information you seek to withhold under the MPA consists of records of a hospital stay and is therefore within the scope of the MPA. We note that the information you seek to withhold under the MPA also includes clinic notes regarding evaluation and treatment of the inmate from the department's institutional division. To the extent such clinic notes were created by department personnel acting under the supervision of a physician, they constitute medical records within the scope of the MPA.

Medical records pertaining to a deceased patient may only be released upon the signed consent of the personal representative of the deceased. *See* Occ. Code §§ 159.005(a)(5). In this case, we note that the requestor has provided an affidavit identifying himself as the personal representative of the deceased. Medical records must be released upon signed, written consent, provided that 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. *See* Occ. Code §§ 159.004, .005. The MPA requires that any subsequent release of medical records be consistent with the purposes for which a governmental body obtained the records. Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991). The submitted medical records may be released only as provided under the MPA. To the extent the submitted clinic notes were prepared by department personnel acting under the supervision of a physician, they also constitute medical records for purposes of the MPA and may be released only as provided under the MPA.

We next address your claim under section 552.134 of the Government Code with respect to the remaining information. Section 552.134 of the Government Code relates to information about inmates of the department and provides in pertinent part:

(a) Except as provided by Subsection (b) or by Section 552.029, information obtained or maintained by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is excepted from the requirements of Section 552.021 if it is information about an inmate who is confined in a facility operated by or under a contract with the department.

Section 552.029 of the Government Code states:

Notwithstanding Section 508.313 or 552.134, the following information about an inmate who is confined in a facility operated by or under a contract with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice 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.

Section 552.134 is explicitly made subject to section 552.029. Under section 552.029(8), basic information regarding the death of an inmate in custody, an alleged crime involving an inmate, and an incident involving the use of force is subject to required disclosure. The submitted documents consist of information about an inmate of the department. Basic information pertaining to the death of the inmate must be released pursuant to section 552.029(8) of the Government Code. We note that the submitted documents also contain information relating to alleged crimes involving the inmate. The department must release basic information about these alleged crimes pursuant to section 552.029(8). The remainder of the submitted information must be withheld under section 552.134 of the Government Code.

In summary, the department must release section one of the submitted custodial death report, and must withhold sections two through five, pursuant to article 49.18(b) of the Code of Criminal Procedure. The submitted medical records may only be released as provided under the MPA. To the extent the submitted clinic notes were prepared by department staff acting under the supervision of a physician, the clinic notes may only be released as provided under the MPA. With the exception of basic information regarding alleged crimes involving the named inmate and regarding the death of the named inmate, which must be released pursuant to section 552.029(8) of the Government Code, the remainder of the submitted information

must be withheld pursuant to section 552.134 of the Government Code. Based on this finding, we do not reach your additional arguments against disclosure.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records 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 records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at (512) 475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge

this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



David R. Saldivar
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

DRS/seg

Ref: ID# 191312

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Mr. Edward Gutierrez
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(w/o enclosures)