



Have you prepared for HIPAA?

By Christy Morrow

In the past, patients' confidential health information was protected by a patchwork of state laws that left gaps in the protection of patients' privacy and confidentiality. Congress has answered the call for universal rules to protect patient records and confidential health information with the passage of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA). With the increasing amount of electronic transfer of data, this law requires new safeguards to protect a patient's health information.

Larger medical organizations have begun to educate themselves and have started some form of compliance program. The majority of smaller provider organizations have not addressed the issues identified in HIPAA. Now is the time for smaller physician practices to become educated and move into a planning phase of HIPAA compliance. Resources and lead-time will depend on the complexity of the organization, current policies and procedures, the systems environment, and degree of connectivity and e-business activity. Small to medium physician practices lag behind due to size and resources; therefore, most of their compliance efforts eventually will be outsourced.

The impact of HIPAA will affect all functions of a practice with day-to-day operations being impacted the most. The implementation of the privacy regulations will challenge current processes and require change that must be embraced by all members of the practice. Providers should appoint compliance officer to ensure success. The larger providers will have a full time employee. The compliance officer's greatest task will be to educate the organization, including medical staff, to the contents and potential impacts of the legislation. Even if providers have not taken steps towards HIPAA compliance programs, naming the responsible party and beginning the education process is a great place to start. Fortunately, the final implementation date is not until April 14, 2003, so there is still time.

As you begin to implement the standards of HIPAA, take advantages of the positive aspects of these regulations. This is a chance to enhance goodwill and patient satisfaction by maintaining patient information securely and privately. If a patient knows that their health information is being kept confidential, they may choose this provider over an equally competent one. An easy way to ensure that their information is being maintained properly is to embrace electronic databases. Providers should leverage their money by using standardized systems that already comply with the security and privacy requirements; hence, choose your vendors wisely!

Within the next year, the Department of Health and Human Services Secretary, Tommy G. Thompson, will correct potential problems that could threaten access to or quality of care brought about by HIPAA. He has proposed

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the “Minimum Necessary” Standard to ease the administrative burden imposed on providers. This Standard would leave it to the provider’s professional judgment as to what constitutes “minimum necessary” information. Sign-in sheets, for example, were going to be abolished completely by HIPAA requirements. Generally, these sheets reveal patients’ names. With the new Standard, the sign-in sheets may still be used but maybe with patients’ id numbers instead.

The health care industry as we know it today is rapidly changing. This presents business opportunities for all medical practices. Education is the key for keeping abreast of these changes. The HIPAA regulations are only the beginning, for they only apply to government funded programs. Insurance companies are sure to follow.

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