

NAVIGATING THE MAZE

*Cheri Benander, MSN, RN, CHC, NHCE-C
Health Services Consultant, HealthTechS3*

This month's article was written by Gretta McKelvey, BSBA, CHC, Director of Regulatory Compliance & Clinical Services; Grant Regional Health Center, Lancaster, WI

HIPAA PRIVACY IN RURAL HEALTH CARE



Practicing healthcare in rural communities can create unique barriers to compliance with HIPAA Privacy Laws. Both clinical and non-clinical staff is frequently called upon to serve their neighbors and their own families when providing healthcare services in both the rural clinic and rural hospital setting. This familiarity and sense of concern for community can easily result in an unintended breach of information

through conversation outside the facility or even on social media. It is in these interactions that staff must be proficient in the details of the HIPAA Privacy Laws, and be confident in monitoring themselves to continue to implement these laws to protect patient's health information.

The education of staff regarding the HIPAA Privacy Laws can be challenging to the Compliance Officer, as he/she may be met with resistance. Staff may not clearly understand their role in protecting privacy as it relates to neighbors and family members or even each other in the "minimum necessary" environment. Awareness and education is the key to instilling confidence in the staff when adhering to the HIPAA Privacy Laws.



Developing a clear Compliance Program that begins with establishing a simple, clear Code of Conduct that can be easily read and understood can provide the foundation to support all other facets of the Compliance Program. The Compliance Program should provide for continuous education and

monitoring, as well as open discussion regarding protecting health information.

The culture of the organization can be changed by continual presence of the Compliance Officer throughout the organization. Setting a goal of implementing regular formal departmental rounding in regard to HIPAA which include risk analysis of specific departments is an excellent opportunity for exposure to the staff. The rounding may also include interactive questions that are asked by the Compliance Officer to staff members in the department. The questionnaire may include scenario questions that often result in department discussions to help to provide the answers or simply start discussions about topics. Formal report back to the manager of the results can also help provide a benchmark whereby the manager can determine the level of HIPAA Compliance in their department. If deficiencies are noted in the rounds, deadlines and follow-up action by the manager may be required. Return rounding in the same departments has historically returned excellent results with overall improvement.

Blogging is also an excellent internal tool to help provide staff with HIPAA Privacy information. A weekly "tip of the week" or blog post on intranet systems or in newsletters can be a quick reminder of the importance of HIPAA and provide short, to-the-point HIPAA rules.



. Examples may include:

- ◆ Remember to place documents with PHI in interoffice envelopes when transporting them throughout the clinic or hospital.
- ◆ When discussing a patient's care with another staff member, be sure to do so in a private location.
- ◆ When talking on the phone to a patient, or a staff member about a patient, be sure to pay attention to surroundings and use a low tone of voice.
- ◆ Avoid conversations about patients in public places such as in hallways, elevators or cafeterias.
- ◆ Use caution when posting comments on social media and avoid comments about patient concerns. Direct anyone with a concern to the proper person in the organization for formal review.
- ◆ Request patient identifiers before speaking to a patient about their own PHI.
- ◆ Verify that proper permission has been given and is on file before speaking to a family member about patient.
- ◆ Use caution when speaking outside of the organization as it might relate to the treatment of a family member or friend, as each patient has the right of protection under HIPAA.
- ◆ When mailing information to a patient, be sure to verify the address for accuracy.

These tips are especially helpful as reminders to staff that may be coming in contact with family and friends on a regular basis in the rural clinic and hospital. Through the use of these techniques to create



awareness of the HIPAA Privacy Laws, rural healthcare organizations can help to ensure that staff members will use the knowledge of the rules on a daily basis to monitor their own interactions with the members of the rural community. Over time, this education may also lead to “self-reporting” by staff to the Compliance Officer when they have a question or concern regarding HIPAA. Internal reporting of HIPAA concerns, including “self-report”, and questions about HIPAA Privacy rules may in fact increase as staff become more aware of the organization's obligations to each patient under the HIPAA Privacy Laws.

HealthTechS3 hopes that the information contained herein will be informative and helpful on industry topics. However, please note that this information is not intended to be definitive. HealthTech and its affiliates expressly disclaim any and all liability, whatsoever, for any such information and for any use made thereof. Recipients of this information should consult original source materials and qualified healthcare regulatory counsel for specific guidance in healthcare reimbursement and regulatory matters.

For more information, please contact Cheri Benander:

Cell: 307-202-0315

Main: 615-309-7421

cheri.benander@healthtechs3.com

5110 Maryland Way, Suite 200 | Brentwood, TN 37027

www.healthtechs3.com

HealthTechS3 is an award-winning healthcare consulting and hospital management firm based in Brentwood, Tennessee with clients across the United States. We are dedicated to the goal of improving performance, achieving compliance, reducing costs and ultimately improving patient care. Leveraging consultants with deep healthcare industry experience, HealthTechS3 provides actionable insights and guidance that supports informed decision making and drives efficiency in operational performance.

BUILDING LEADERS | TRANSFORMING HOSPITALS | IMPROVING CARE

