

Optometry Coding & Billing Alert

READER QUESTIONS: Check In Patients-Not Privacy Violations

Question: We would like patients to write down their date of birth or the last four digits of their Social Security numbers on our sign-in sheet in addition to their names to use when trying to properly match patients with their charts. Would this lead to a privacy-rule violation?

Maine subscriber

Answer: Whether this is a privacy violation depends on what information you request. You are allowed to use sign-in sheets, but only if the information disclosed on them is appropriately limited. And your sign-in sheet may only contain information necessary for sign-in purposes, the Office for Civil Rights explains in an FAQ on its Web site.

Best practice: Limit the identifying information patients are asked to write down along with their names. For example, you could ask for their names and the months of their birthdays or the names of their streets. That way, even if someone inappropriately accesses the sheet, the information contained on it is unlikely to harm the patient.

Tip: Ask patients to jot their information on stickers. Your staff can remove the stickers as patients sign in. Warning: A sticker-based system is risky if your staffers cannot remove the patient data as it is received because someone could snatch the sticker for inappropriate use, experts say.

The Bottom Line: While any information seen on your sign-in sheet or overheard in your waiting room is categorized as an incidental disclosure, you must still use caution.