

Optometry Coding & Billing Alert

Reader Questions: Give Health Info Over Phone as Last Resort

Question: We sometimes get calls from patients wanting their medical information over the telephone. Is this a HIPAA violation? What is the best way to authenticate that these callers are who they say they are?

Mississippi Subscriber

Answer: It's almost impossible to verify the identity of someone on the other end of the telephone. It's OK to give out PHI over the phone if you've initiated contact with a patient and obtained his permission, but you're opening yourself up to a potential HIPAA violation.

The caller could be an ex-spouse or someone in a custody dispute trying to obtain confidential information. In those cases, a caller might know the patient's Social Security number or other identifying info.

Bottom line: Give health information over the phone only as a last resort. If you're worried about authenticating callers, you could assign patients a password or some other information that proves that they really are who they claim to be.

Advice for Reader Questions and You Be the Expert contributed by **David Gibson, OD, FAAO**, practicing optometrist in Lubbock, Texas; and **Charles Wimbish, OD**, president of Wimbish Consulting Group in Martinsville, Va.