

Health Information Compliance Alert

Current Trends: 3 Tips Help You Avoid HIPAA Trouble Due to Staff Posts On Social Media Forums

Prohibit staff from making this No. 1 privacy mistake.

Online social forums provide a great networking tool, but they're also rife with potential privacy and public relations snafus, as a growing number of media accounts have shown. Below experts suggest several tips to help your healthcare organization stay in the clear.

1. Realize the potential for problems. "Facebook and similar social forums can be a very dangerous world" in terms of privacy, warns **Jim Sheldon-Dean**, principal and director of compliance services for Lewis Creek Systems LLC in Charlotte, Vt. "Never assume that anything that [is posted on a social media forum] is going to be private."
2. Develop a policy and procedure to cover the bases. The policy should address the dos and don'ts for using the online media, including what staff can and cannot say in that forum -- "and under what circumstances," says Sheldon-Dean.

Some experts advise against posting anything about patients whatsoever on an online networking forum.

Attorney **Heather Berchem** doesn't know of any facility that has forbid staff from consulting with each other on various discussion forums, which are often hosted by professional organizations. But those discussions should be generic, she stresses, such as "'how would you handle a patient who does x, y, or z?' That's different from posting that 'we had a patient come in today' who is doing x, y, and z,'" says Berchem, in private practice in New Haven, Conn.

3. Tap those in the know for training. When training staff to use online social media appropriately, include input from people who really understand how the social media works, advises attorney **David Harlow**, with The Harlow Group LLC in Newton, Mass. For example, "find a young person on staff or someone who uses the various social media forums on a regular basis to help with the training. Use real examples."