

## Health Information Compliance Alert

### HIPAA: Feast on Patient Fodder in the New Year -- But, Make Sure It's HIPAA-Compliant

#### Utilize HIPAA-friendly feedback for a 2017 revenue boost.

With the quality of your medical care set to affect your bottom line starting Jan. 1, 2017, MACRA ensures that your patients' satisfaction will be tied to your profits. It won't be enough to tiptoe around the required quality measures under MIPS — you'll need to embrace new strategies to up the ante on patient engagement.

The time to reach out to your flock is now. The importance of patient feedback can't be understated at this point in healthcare history, when reaching out to those you treat might help you reach your QPP goals. There are many different avenues available to garner this critical data — a checkbox on the sign-in sheet asking where the patient discovered your practice, the treatment take-home forms, or a link on the practice web site or social media pages that links directly to your business.

**Reminder.** Whichever route you go to compile that precious data, make sure you and your staff keep your patient communications HIPAA-compliant.

#### Utilize Your Front Office Banter

As patients enter and exit a medical office, a well-trained staff can amass a myriad of patient fodder from comments before and after the visit. The daily meet-and-greet at the appointment desk often garners more feedback than any other area of the practice.

"This permits real-time data that helps a manager or supervisor make changes to communication or workflow," explains **Deborah Walker Keegan, PhD, FACMPE**, healthcare consultant, keynote speaker, author and President of Medical Practice Dimensions, Inc. in the Asheville, N.C., area, which improves patient satisfaction in the process.

**Try this approach.** Practice management staff or your office's patient-engagement expert can interact with patients — following the strict guidelines of the HIPAA privacy rule — and survey them informally while they check-in and check-out in the reception area, asking about the visit. "Follow a standard three- to five-question list," Walker recommends, keeping it simple and short.

Questions you might ask the patient include:

- How long were you waiting?
- Did you get the appointment time you requested?
- Was the front office staff courteous and helpful?
- Is there anything we could have done today to improve your experience?

Anonymous suggestion boxes, HIPAA-compliant kiosks, and take-home post-treatment surveys offer opportunities to collect vital data and mesh with patients during your daily in-house operations.

**Tip:** It's best to shy away from bulletin boards and monitors that mention patients by name or in pictures — this is a clear violation of the HIPAA privacy rule.

#### Acknowledge Patient Appreciation and Loyalty

Never miss the opportunity to reach out to your patients with thank you notes, texts, emails, or phone calls to acknowledge your appreciation for their business and loyalty. Your assistants can be part of the efforts with the follow-up

calls, texts, emails, and mailers within 24-48 hours using patients' HIPAA-approved contact information. Don't forget that grateful patients oftentimes become your most steadfast advocates.

**Watch the PHI.** Postcards, text updates, and phone messages often skirt the HIPAA compliance line, depending on the interaction. Texting electronic Protected Health Information (ePHI) can be a tricky business, too. Likewise with phone messages left on answering machines or with individuals or businesses not noted on a patient's acceptable call list.

Thank you notes are a great idea to reinforce your appreciation of patients' loyalty, but be sure that the envelope is sealed. Postcards are cheaper, but the safety and security of your patients must come first.

**Case in point:** In February, the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OMHAS) mailed out survey postcards to its patients requesting feedback on its services. OMHAS sent out these surveys annually to solicit feedback from its patients who've sought addiction or mental health treatment.

In fact, OMHAS mailed out two different satisfaction surveys, which displayed patient names and addresses, as well as a request to participate in the survey regarding the services they received through OMHAS, local news outlet WDTN reported. OMHAS didn't place these postcards in sealed envelopes, so anyone could see the protected health information (PHI) on the postcards.

On April 22, OMHAS Director Tracy Plouck issued an apology for the breach (see <http://mha.ohio.gov/Portals/0/assets/News/pressReleases/20160422-Media-Notice-Privacy-Breach.pdf>) and stated that OMHAS is conducting "a thorough review of its internal processes and policies relating to consumer outreach and data use to assure better oversight and protection of health information, including additional training for all department staff members."

### **Consider These Other Options to Increase Your Revenue**

There are many ways to discover your patients' attitudes about the quality of the care you give. After all, that feedback can be applied to making adjustments in your practice that will increase revenue in the future.

Here are four out-of-the-box ideas to help assess your patients' reactions:

- Maintain a social media presence that addresses practice concerns and to-dos.
- Send out a monthly newsletter highlighting new technologies and services with options for questions through a linked patient portal.
- Use a medical secret shopper service to shop your practice.
- Coordinate a monthly patient, focus group that targets ways to improve your practice.

**Reminder.** Ask every patient, every time, for feedback, and thank them for their reviews. Statistics show that patients rarely leave reviews, so it is vital to ask them each and every visit while remembering to follow-up with a thank you to show them that the practice values both their insight and their patronage.