Health Information Compliance Alert

HIPAA Security Violations: Med Students Need Privacy Training, Caught Posting Unprofessional Messages

Incidents spark crackdown on patient privacy violations.

According to the Journal of the American Medical Association today's medical students have a lot to learn -- all that anatomy and saving lives stuff. But medical schools and teaching hospitals should add some PHI training to the curriculum if they want to keep the facility out of HIPAA trouble.

"Many U.S. medical schools have had cases of medical students posting unprofessional content online, including incidents where patient confidentiality was violated," says U.S. News & World Report.

Medical schools across the country report instances when med students had posted unprofessional content online in places like social networking sites, according to a study published recently in the Journal of the American Medical Association. In 13 percent of cases reported, patient confidentiality was violated. More commonly, students used profanity, discriminatory language and sexually suggestive terms when describing patients Many U.S. medical schools have had cases of medical students posting unprofessional content online, including incidents where patient confidentiality was violated, according to a new study. It also found that few schools have policies to deal with such transgressions.

Researchers sent an anonymous survey to 130 medical schools in the Association of American Medical Colleges Vol. 9, No. 10 October 23, 2009 and received 78 responses. Of the schools that responded, 47 (60 percent) reported incidents involving students posting unprofessional content.

In the past year, six of those schools had no incidents, 36 had fewer than five incidents, three had five to 15 incidents, and one was aware of incidents but did not know how many, according to **Dr. Katherine C. Chretien,** of the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center, and colleagues.

"Incidents involving violation of patient confidentiality in the past year were reported by 13 percent (6/46). Student use of profanity, frankly discriminatory language, depiction of intoxication, and sexually suggestive material were more commonly reported," Chretien wrote in a news release. "Of 45 schools that reported an incident and responded to the question about disciplinary actions, 30 gave informal warning (67 percent) and 3 reported student dismissal (7 percent). Policies that cover student-posted online content were reported by 38 percent (28/73) of deans. Of schools without such policies, 11 percent (5/46) were actively developing new policies to cover online content.

Deans reporting incidents were significantly more likely to report having such a policy (51 percent vs. 18 percent), believing these issues could be effectively addressed (91 percent vs. 63 percent;), and having higher levels of concern," she added.

The researchers recommended a number of ways to address the concerns identified in the study.

"The formal professional curriculum should include a digital media component, which could include instruction on managing the 'digital footprint,' such as electing privacy settings on social networking sites and performing periodic Web searches of oneself. This is important given that residency program directors, future employers, and patients may access this information," they said.

Also, "discussions among students, residents, and faculty should occur to help define medical professionalism in the era of Web 2.0," the researchers concluded.