

Health Information Compliance Alert

Privacy Strategies: Nail Down Responses to Common Patient Privacy Questions

Help your front office employees provide accurate answers quickly with some pre-written replies.

Your patients usually deal with your front office staff first. Take charge of the situation by training front desk staffers on how to respond to privacy-sensitive queries from patients rather than risking impromptu replies.

Although HIPAA patient privacy laws have been around for years now, any practice can tell you that patients ask questions about HIPAA at least once a day. Making sure that your staff can provide your patients with quick and accurate answers is vital, and you can improve those odds if you create pre-written responses for the staff members to follow.

What is scripting? Essentially, scripting refers to preparing responses in anticipation of certain patient questions or scenarios. For example, when patients come into your office, your employees can use a script to present them with your notice of privacy practices and to answer common questions they may have regarding the form.

To get your workforce ready for their starring roles, check out these scripting tips:

Don't Let Scripting Replace Understanding

You can have all the scripts in the world, but it's not going to prepare your employees for situations where they don't understand what the policies are. Therefore, strategies like scripting must go hand-in-hand with an entity's ability to train its staff in the ways of HIPAA. If your frontline employees simply don't understand the fundamentals of privacy compliance or your organization's policies and procedures concerning patient privacy, then there's little hope that a script is going to provide them or your patients with any relief.

Remember: Scripting should supplement rather than supplant efforts to train your staff on privacy rules and procedures.

Write Scripts With Staff Input

One of the first mistakes you're liable to make when preparing scripts for your organization is to create them without consulting your workforce members. Receiving staff input on scripts is vital because you want to put it in their words. After all, it's your employees who are going to be most likely delivering these scripts, so they'd better be the ones most comfortable with what they're going to say.

Training tip: Your practice can host round-table lunches during which groups of employees can be presented with a scenario and asked to brainstorm ways that they might respond to that situation. Essentially, then, the activity is designed to come up with the script ☐ or scripts ☐ that work best for that group.

Be Consistent & Positive

The telltale sign ☐ and benefit ☐ of a good script is that it ensures what your frontline staffers communicate to your patients is both consistent and appropriate. If a patient were to ask the same question to different receptionists from the morning, afternoon and evening shifts, then that patient should receive a similar response for each and every time.

The most important thing is to impress upon office employees that HIPAA is a good thing. The last thing you want is for your employees to grumble in front of your patients about what a pain HIPAA is. Both your employees and your scripts

should positively emphasize that all the extra steps you've taken for privacy compliance are ultimately for the patient's benefit.

Consider This Sample Language

You should tailor your scripts to your office's most frequently-asked questions and your staff members' comfort levels, but the following sample answers can get you started.

1. When an individual is handed a notice of privacy practices, he or she may ask what the notice is and why it is being provided. A good answer would be:

"This is a notice that is being provided pursuant to federal privacy law that requires us to tell you how we will use your health information and it also tells you what rights you have regarding your own health information."

2. A patient may ask, "Why are we being required to get this material and sign off that we have received it?" A good answer would be:

"Congress wanted to be sure that all patients understand how their health information is being used and wanted to make sure that you know that you have rights related to your own health information."

3. A patient may then ask, "Well, so what are my rights?" A good answer would be:

"Your rights are set forth clearly in the notice of privacy practices. After you review the notice, I would be happy to have our privacy officer discuss them with you."

4. When a patient asks about information with which the employee is not familiar □ i.e., a patient asks a lab technician questions regarding information that will be released for billing purposes □ a good answer would be:

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to refer you to our billing department [or privacy officer, or front desk, etc.] for answers to those questions."

5. A patient may ask, "Will you release this information to my family members?" A good script answer would be:

"Our notice of privacy practices addresses to whom your information may be released. [Hand them copy and point to the appropriate section.] If you have any further questions, I would be happy to get our privacy officer to answer them for you." [Unless staff is adequately trained on your policy and can answer these questions for the patient.]

Appointment reminders: When leaving a phone message for an appointment reminder, the message should be generic and not contain any specific information about the individual's condition, such as:

"This is Doctor Smith's office calling to remind John Doe that he has an appointment at 2:00 tomorrow afternoon."

If further instructions need to be given, you could say, "Please return our call at 888-8888 for further information about what you must do to prepare for that appointment."