

Health Information Compliance Alert

Reader Questions: Make The Call

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

Answer: "It's almost impossible to verify the identity of someone on the other end of the telephone," cautions **Kelly Pickens**, an attorney with the **Health Law Center** in Greenville, SC. It's okay to give out PHI over the phone if you've "initiated contact with a patient and obtained their permission," but you're opening yourself up to a potential HIPAA violation, Pickens warns. The caller could be "an ex-spouse or someone in a custody dispute trying to obtain confidential information," she explains. In those cases a caller might know the patient's Social Security number or other identifying info.

The Bottom Line: Give health information over the phone only as a last resort, Pickens advises. 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, she suggests.