

Health Information Compliance Alert

Reader Questions: Take the Necessary Precautions With Sign-In Sheets

Question: The physician practice I work for is the only one in our small town. We always use a sign-in sheet because we do get fairly busy and try to keep our visits in order. Recently, we heard that it's not a good idea to utilize a sign-in system because of HIPAA privacy. Is it OK to still use them?

South Carolina Subscriber

Answer: Yes, many practices still ask patients to write on the sign-in sheet when they present for a visit, and that's perfectly fine.

Sign-in sheets can be a bone of contention among HIPAA privacy experts, many of whom discourage practices from using them at all. However, you are legally entitled to use them, as long as you don't request too much data from the patient.



"Covered entities, such as physician's offices, may use patient sign-in sheets or call out patient names in the waiting room, so long as the information disclosed is appropriately limited," the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) says on its website. "However, these incidental disclosures are permitted only when the covered entity has implemented reasonable safeguards and the minimum necessary standard, where appropriate. For example, the sign-in sheet may not display medical information that is not necessary for the purpose of signing in (e.g., the medical problem for which the patient is seeing the physician)."

If you need a patient to give you private information or a list of medications they're taking, hand them a history form to complete while they're in the waiting room.