

Health Information Compliance Alert

Technology: The New Age of Medicine

Are you considering telemedicine? Here's the scoop!

We've all seen those sci-fi movies replete with flying cars, robots and teletransporters. Even though the new millennium failed to offer such futuristic possibilities, it has ushered in a growing demand for medicine that extends beyond physical borders. Never fear -- you can test it in your facility and maintain your HIPAA compliance!

First Steps

There are a couple of critical things to keep in mind when testing out telemedicine for your organization.

Be realistic. "There's no such thing as absolute privacy and absolute security," proclaims **Alan Goldberg**, an attorney with Goulston & Storrs in New York, NY. Remember: You can't assure 100 percent safety, but you can implement a good telemedicine timeline -- one that doesn't try to accomplish too much too soon.

"You have to work and aggregate towards a positive result," Goldberg says. And, "you've got to keep working at it," he furthers. Reality: Failure to do so will leave you with immature policies and procedures that don't protect patient information. That will lead you straight to a HIPAA violation, he warns.

Organize! "There's no substitution for proper organization and anticipation," Goldberg says. Appoint and train a good team that understands what must be done and has a good idea of how to do it. "This internal function is generally going to be the most enhancing," he explains.

Without a strong internal team with good knowledge of both the possibilities and risks in telemedicine, your patients' information could be exposed, warns Dr. **Werner Slack**, co-director of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center's Division of Clinical Computing in Boston.

Push & Pull

More people are willing to accept telemedicine as part of a standard medical relationship. As patients demand the service, its use will increase and its cost will decrease.

Even doctors, once hesitant about the risks involved, are more quickly jumping on board. "Once they try it, they tend to like it," says Slack. Example: It has proved especially helpful when "managing patients with chronic diseases like diabetes," he says. "The family can ask questions without having to come into the office," he explains.

"Telemedicine providers are usually ahead of other providers because of their familiarity with encryption, validation and authentication," Goldberg says. But, that doesn't mean they won't fall behind.

Play It Safe

Avoid these pitfalls:

Don't Be Overconfident. Don't assume that your office is following HIPAA compliant guidelines. Further, don't fall into the trap that reading a book will give you all the answers. "Don't shrug off your compliance responsibility" by developing rash, shortsighted policies, Goldberg warns.

HIPAA In A Box. "There are no easy solutions," Slack says. You must approach all these situations in a deliberate, measured fashion, taking into account all your office's risks and resources, Goldberg furthers.

Making your telemedicine component compliant isn't easy, but it's also not impossible. You have to enforce holistic measures and make it part of the larger compliance process, Slack says.

Use Your Resources. "The government has taken a tremendous and extraordinary approach with empathy, understanding and support," Goldberg reminds. Tip: Take advantage of all your resources, including free information found on Internet sites like HealthLawyer.com, he says.

The Future

While the health care world isn't ready to adopt telemedicine on its own, it can enhance your patient relationships, Goldberg advises. "It's very supportive of what you're already doing," Slack says.

No one can predict what the future will bring, but with modern technology and increasing patient awareness of -- and demand for -- telemedicine, the next 10 years could surprise those who underestimate telemedicine's adoptability.

"The number of providers involved in telemedicine is still very small compared to the number of those involved in interface medicine," Goldberg reminds. That means there's an open market. Key: If you're on the telemedicine train, you're more likely to reap those rewards, Slack explains.