AMA Issues Guidelines for Patient Privacy

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Prominent healthcare experts unveiled ethical guidelines calling on all participants in the healthcare system--from physicians, hospitals, and health plans to employee benefit managers, unions, and others--to rigorously protect the confidentiality of any medical records entrusted to them.

The consensus report, "Domain of Health Care Information Privacy," was created by the Ethical Force Program, which was initiated by the Institute for Ethics at the American Medical Association. The report contains more than 30 specific, measureable expectations for protecting privacy that individuals and organizations entrusted with identifiable patient information can use to assess their performance.

The consensus report is organized into eight content areas, each of which has a corresponding set of measurable performance expectations. An overview of these areas follows:

transparency: explanations of policies, procedures, and practices regarding collection, storage, and use of personally identifiable health information should be publicly available

consent: informed consent for the collection, storage, and use of personally identifiable health information should be obtained from individuals

collection limitation: collection of health information should be limited to requirements for current or reasonably projected future needs

security: identifiable health information should be protected by reasonable security measures appropriate to the sensitivity of the information

individual access: individuals should be allowed to view and amend or append information to their health records

data quality: indentifiable health information should be accurate, complete, and up to date

information use limitation: disclosure and use of personally identifiable health information should be limited to those purposes that are made explicit at the time of consent or else otherwise authorized

accountability: health information trustees should be accountable for adhering to standards for collection, storage, and use of personally identifiable health information

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