

# Advocating for Unique Healthcare Identification (Resolution)

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## Resolution from the 1997 House of Delegates: *Advocating for Unique Healthcare Identification*

### Background Information

During the past few decades, many technological advances in healthcare have occurred. Despite this, the typical health record has not changed significantly in the past 50 years. To meet ever-increasing demands for readily accessible, cost-effective information, health records must evolve to an electronic or computer-based format. This will allow the healthcare industry to be connected by an integrated system of electronic communication networks, giving providers and payers the ability to efficiently exchange information and process claims, while safeguarding privacy and security interests.

Computer-based health records offer significant opportunities to improve healthcare and reduce costs. The ability to maintain health information over an individual's lifetime and transfer it electronically between providers will facilitate care and reduce duplicate tests and therapies. The use of knowledge-based decision support systems that are driven by data including the master patient index will reduce errors and improve efficiency. In addition, automated health records will enhance outcomes and other research programs through electronic data capture and reduce costs by improving staff productivity.

Linking computer-based records across care systems throughout an individual's lifetime requires a consistent means to uniquely identify each individual who receives healthcare services. Currently, individuals have multiple identification numbers, usually a different number for each of their health insurance plans and the various providers who have participated in their care.

To make longitudinal records a reality, a unique healthcare identifier, which can be used by all providers and third party payers, must be developed. The identifier should make it possible to:

- Identify individuals receiving healthcare services
- Link different computer-based records on the same individual compiled by various providers throughout the individual's lifetime
- Provide security for confidential health information

Healthcare identifiers should be unique, permanent, secure, accessible, cost-effective, and limited to one per person. Also, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (Public Law 104-191) requires the Secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services to adopt standards by February 1998 for a unique health identifier, as well as specified transactions, to enable health information to be exchanged electronically.

A number of systems have been proposed, including:

- Unique healthcare identifier
- Social Security number
- Biometric identifiers
- Directory service
- Personal immutable properties

- Existing medical record numbers with a practitioner prefix
- Public key/private key cryptography

## Resolution

**Topic:** Advocating for Unique Healthcare Identification  
**Intent:** Help develop a secure system for uniquely identifying each individual who receives healthcare services in order to make longitudinal (lifetime) health records a reality throughout the United States.  
**Addressed to:** All HIM professionals and AHIMA's strategic partners  
**Originator:** AHIMA MPI Task Force  
**Approved by:** 1997 House of Delegates  
**Date:** October 19, 1997

Whereas, patients have a fundamental right to health information privacy;

Whereas, individuals with legitimate, authorized access to patient-specific identifiable health information must be educated about their responsibilities in protecting this information;

Whereas, patients may be subject to discrimination, embarrassment, or other harm if unauthorized parties access confidential information;

Whereas, AHIMA and its component groups encourage healthcare and public health organizations, health insurers, and other appropriate parties to make protecting the privacy of patient health information an organization's priority;

Whereas, AHIMA and its component groups promote awareness of the need to use appropriate security measures and available technologies to protect confidential health information from unauthorized access, release, or alteration;

Whereas, to make longitudinal (lifetime) health records a reality throughout the United States, a system that can be used by all providers and third parties for uniquely identifying each individual who receives healthcare services must be developed;

Whereas, to meet ever-increasing demands for readily accessible cost-effective information, health records must evolve to an electronic or computer-based format;

Whereas, computer-based health records offer significant opportunities to improve healthcare and reduce costs;

Whereas, linking computer-based records across care systems throughout the individual's lifetime requires a consistent means to uniquely identify each individual who receives healthcare services; and

Whereas, healthcare identifiers should be unique, permanent, secure, accessible, cost-effective, and limited to one per person; therefore, be it

*Resolved*, That AHIMA members advocate that integrated healthcare delivery systems, community health information networks, health insurers, government, and other appropriate parties utilize computer algorithms and multiple data elements to link individually identifiable health information across providers and care settings; and

*Resolved*, That AHIMA members educate responsible parties to accurately collect data elements to uniquely identify patients and provide professional expertise to assist healthcare organizations in developing systems that will protect patient privacy and confidentiality.

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