

CMS Bans Use of Physician Signature Stamps

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by Gloryanne Bryant, RHIA, CCS

Question: What is the new Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services ruling on use of signature stamps?

Answer: The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has made it clear that it will only accept signatures that are handwritten, electronic, or facsimiles of original written or electronic signatures.

In a May 2008 transmittal focused on hospice and home health (number 248, change request 5971), CMS stated that it would no longer accept medical record documentation with physician-stamped signatures. Subsequent guidance in the July 29 MedLearn Matters SE0829 included all providers and suppliers in this change. This new guidance was partly due to compliance concerns that CMS has had for some time over the use of signature stamps.

Because the July 29 guidance included all providers, a wide range of healthcare settings are affected by this ban (e.g., inpatient and outpatient hospitals, physician offices, skilled nursing facilities, rehabilitation facilities, psychiatric hospitals, home health facilities, and hospices). HIM staff should start discussing this issue with compliance, finance, and operations staff. They should then communicate this change to clinical and nursing staff, medical staff, and physicians.

In order to validate an organization's compliance with this new guidance, HIM professionals will need to conduct random audits and check on documentation where the use of signature stamps has been common in the past. Hospitals should establish a team approach to this issue and include case management, nursing, and HIM in the validation team. They should remember to check the outpatient departments, as the lab and radiology areas often have signature stamps used on the requisitions they receive. It is important to note that this includes checking progress notes, physician orders, and treatment plans.

HIM professionals should then report their findings and identify areas for improvement. As part of the compliance work, HIM professionals will want to take corrective action where needed and within a reasonable period of time. They should also determine if additional education is needed in the organization or office practice.

HIM professionals should be proactive and post signage in key areas to get the message out, including the dictation or charting areas and the emergency room.

Signature stamp use could become a target area for future Recovery Audit Contractor audits, other investigations, or even Joint Commission, so striving for compliance now will pay off in the long run.

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Article citation:

Bryant, Gloryanne H.. "CMS Bans Use of Physician Signature Stamps" *Journal of AHIMA* 79, no.11 (November 2008): 59.
