

Ensuring Compliance in the New Frontier

Save to myBoK

by Anne Zender, MA, editor

Consumers go to healthcare Web sites to get information, keep track of their health, or connect with others. Behind the scenes at one such site, Barbara Demster, MS, RHIA, is working to make sure everything is legal.

Demster is corporate compliance officer for Healtheon/ WebMD, an Atlanta, GA-based company that offers extensive clinical and administrative services to physicians and healthcare content for consumers. Physician services include connectivity to laboratories for test requisitions and results, transcription services, coding compliance monitoring, claims eligibility, and payment to name just a few. Healtheon/WebMD even offers a consumer online health record from its Web site at www.webmd.com (for more about online medical record systems, see "Online Consumer Health Records: Revolution or Confusion" *Journal of AHIMA*, March 2000, p. 28-32).

Demster's job is to ensure Healtheon/WebMD's policies, products, and services comply with existing regulatory requirements. "Because of the broad scope of our connectivity services, we must comply or help our business partners comply with many laws, rules, and regulations," says Demster. "Since the Internet crosses state boundaries, that creates special problems with regulations."

The Internet has changed the way most people work, but for Demster, this job is just the latest development in her long HIM career. She joined Healtheon/WebMD in 1998 and though she has worked in many settings and has a broad variety of HIM experience, she says technology is what holds her interest now.

Don't Believe the Hype

The past year has seen a proliferation of Internet healthcare sites, many with blitzes of publicity. Beyond the hype, though, Demster says that the public holds a number of misconceptions about what is loosely called "e-health." One misperception, she says, is the general characterization of the Internet as a place where data is not securable. "People think of it as a wide-open, unregulated frontier populated by hackers and unscrupulous data gatherers lurking around every Web site," Demster says. "The industry is maturing and this characterization is becoming outdated as security standards become more widespread in the industry. HIPAA will certainly help in this regard."

Another misconception is that Healtheon/WebMD is outside the realm of regulation. Because Healtheon/WebMD is a major clearinghouse for medical claims, it is considered a "covered entity" by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and is subject to its provisions.

Seeing Opportunities

Understanding HIPAA—and other regulations including those pertinent to laboratory and pharmacy operations—is Demster's latest challenge. But she says that her HIM background has prepared her well for it, and sees similar opportunities for other HIM professionals as the field develops. "Compliance has always been the bailiwick of HIM professionals. We have always been the one entity that clearly straddled the medical, business and legal aspects of healthcare," she says.

The opportunities "e-health" presents aren't limited to compliance, though. Demster sees a number of possible roles for HIM professionals in many areas: "Developing privacy and confidentiality infrastructures for any operation that handles personal information. That's our strong suit. There's also product management, developing new software applications. Implementing HIPAA is a huge employment of our skills. Managing and mining data from electronic databases—there are quality management and decision support opportunities. And helping consumers is a new area."

Because she sees so many opportunities for HIM professionals, Demster urges her colleagues not to waste a minute in acquainting themselves with the new technology. "We need to educate ourselves on the current technology capabilities or we will quickly become an anachronism," she says. "Don't look at technology or the Internet as something to fear and fight. Look upon them as marvelous new tools in your tool box that will allow you to do things in HIM you never thought possible."

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