Health Information Security: Revisiting the 80/20 Rule

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One of the most useful lessons I learned while working in healthcare quality improvement was the Pareto Principle, often referred to as the 80/20 rule. The concept is that in any endeavor, 20 percent of something is always responsible for 80 percent of the results.

This phenomenon is also referred to as the "vital few and trivial many" because a few (20 percent) are vital and many (80 percent) are trivial. Consider the following examples in HIM: the situations where privacy is at greatest risk; the vital few codes that present the greatest challenge to compliance; the record content that presents the greatest challenge for completion; the 20 percent of employees that that take up 80 percent of your time.

This universal principle serves as a daily reminder to focus 80 percent of our time and energy on the 20 percent of our work that is really important. Reminding yourself about the 20 percent that really needs your attention can be a lifeline.

Leveraging the Lessons of Privacy

April 14, 2003, was the beginning of a new era in privacy protection. Despite many tangible and intangible results, the industry is still learning what it takes to change a culture. We are also learning what needs to change in the rule itself, how to handle conflicts between federal rule and state law, which operational practices work best, and how to demonstrate compliance. Misinformation continues to appear in the press, but nonetheless, we have made great progress. We are learning that educating an industry and a society about privacy practices is a process that needs to be reinforced over and over.

The HIPAA security rule goes into effect on April 21, 2005, and it is the next logical advance in how we safeguard protected health information. It allows us to improve on and extend the effect of our privacy efforts. And it is on the short list of vital issues that need the attention of HIM professionals.

Security expert Tom Walsh helps us understand the rule and where we should focus in "The Proof Is in the Policy." Walsh breaks the rule into its administrative, physical, and technical components and urges us to leverage our work on HIPAA privacy. As with privacy, focusing on sound policies and procedures will produce 80 percent of the compliance results. And he urges HIM professionals to lead implementation efforts.

The New Lessons of Security Management

In "Electronic Record, Electronic Security," Mark Hagland describes the technologies that must become part of the HIM lexicon. At the same time, he reinforces that the greatest challenges in compliance are people, not technology.

As we have all learned since 9/11, contingency planning is a key element of any security program. Sandra Nutten and Chris Mansueti provide guidance on contingency planning for HIPAA security in "An IT Contingency Plan to Meet HIPAA Security Standards." As with security technology, there is a lexicon and logical process for contingency planning that needs to become a competency for all who manage health information.

With more remote information processing functions such as coding, billing, and transcription, HIM professionals must be able to design, manage, and evaluate application-level security protocols. Tim Keough provides a model in "Safe at Home," including the key procedural, technology, people, and contingency planning considerations that have become part of the vital few elements of contemporary HIM practice.

We hope that this in-depth coverage of HIPAA security will help you be more effective in identifying the "vital few" so HIM professionals can be as successful in leading security compliance efforts as they have been in leading privacy.

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