

Information Security--A Database View

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by Anne Zender

HIM professionals agree that applying the principles of information security is important in a hospital setting. But as Sharon Johnson, RRA, knows, those principles can be applied in many situations--including settings under construction. Since spring 1997, Johnson has been a member of a volunteer task force setting up a tracking system for healthcare services delivered to homeless people in the Oklahoma City area. The Clinic Coalition Task Force is collecting data on services provided to the homeless at area hospitals and free clinics, building a database of this information, and looking at ways to connect the facilities together to continue to maintain the database.

The aim, Johnson says, is to improve services provided to the homeless and to use the data collected to determine where new clinics should be established based on community needs. A local hospital has already volunteered computer resources for a database containing the information.

The coalition, whose participants include four Oklahoma City hospitals and the City-County Health Department, is entirely composed of volunteers. Johnson, who serves on the committee in addition to her job as clinic support administrator for the Oklahoma City-County Health Department, is the only HIM professional in the group.

"We want to provide the best care we can for indigent patients," Johnson says. "We try to be receptive to community needs."

In addition to tracking medical care, the coalition is also looking at tracking preventive services such as immunization, prenatal care, and wellness education provided by the clinics. "The aim is to provide preventive care—to help people before they might become sick and have to enter the system," Johnson says.

As the work of the group has progressed, Johnson and her fellow volunteers have had to build information security policies into their procedures. In addition to establishing procedures ensuring confidentiality and consistent release of information, Johnson notes that the group also has juggled issues such as:

- Building in consistent security procedures, such as monitoring use of the system and audit procedures
- Establishing a secure network, with features such as firewalls, so that information can be added at all the satellites and securely downloaded to the main database
- Establishing a uniform level of computer security at all the satellite clinics
- Educating staff members at all of the facilities on information security practices, such as secure computer log-ins and log-outs, patient confidentiality, and server access

The coalition has also had to deal with some issues that are more commonly found in working with the homeless population, Johnson says, such as patients who don't want to give their full or real names. "We get a lot of pseudonyms," she says. This sometimes makes it necessary to monitor records, as patients may eventually feel comfortable enough to give their full names. "Then we go back and combine duplicates," she says.

The volunteers are also looking at ways to keep better track of what patients have received services. One possibility is to institute photo ID badges for patients who may circulate between various clinics in the area. "Depending on the services offered, we have had problems in the past where people traded cards to get the services they needed, or sold their cards once they had received services," Johnson says.

For More Information

AHIMA published *Security and Access: Guidelines for Managing Electronic Patient Information*, by Sandra R. Fuller, in 1997. The Association also publishes *In Confidence*, a bimonthly newsletter that addresses security and confidentiality issues.

The following Web sites offer online guidance on information security:

- The Computer-based Patient Record Institute (CPRI): <http://www.cpri.org>
- The Information Systems Security Association: <http://www.uhsa.uh.edu/issa/>
- The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Computer Security Division: <http://csrc.nsl.nist.gov/nistpubs/800-12/>
- The National Computer Security Association (NCSA): <http://www.ncsa.com>

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Article Citation:

Zender, Anne. "Information Security—A Database View." *Journal of AHIMA* 69, no. 3 (1998): 50.

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