Keep Out: Unsecured PHI Inside

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Crumbling, decaying, and abandoned hospitals aren't just physically dangerous examples of urban decrepitude—they also could be prime targets for medical identity thieves who know what they're doing.

Take the case of Chicago, IL's Edgewater Medical Center, a neighborhood hospital that fell into disrepair after a massive Medicare fraud scheme left the facility and many of its physicians without sufficient funds to remain open in 2002. Three years ago the *Chicago Tribune*[1] conducted an investigation into the state of medical records left in the facility since its closure—medical records containing sensitive patient information such as Social Security numbers and treatment details that had been left scattered throughout the building for 12 years. The *Tribune* noted at the time that the building's custodians had taken some steps to secure records that were still on site and destroy records that were 10 years old or older.

News reports state that efforts were made to remove the medical records after the *Tribune*'s article was published. However, an article published by *DNAInfo* in December 2016 and photos taken by individuals who have illegally gained access to the site report that boxes of old records, housed in shelves and in boxes marked "deceased," are still scattered and unsecured throughout the building, despite a decree for their destruction.[2]

The site of the Edgewater Medical Center has been designated as "green space" to be owned in the future by the Chicago Park District, although demolition and renovation have yet to begin, according to *DNAInfo*. Until then city alderman and property developers have continued to pass the buck over whose responsibility it is to destroy remaining records.

As the *Tribune* and AHIMA's health privacy experts noted[3] in the past, medical records are frequently found in medical centers that close abruptly. The responsible officials are often consumed by labor-intensive bankruptcy activities and thus lack the time, funds, or focus to go about destroying records. According to court documents regarding another Chicago-area hospital bankruptcy, moving all of its records to offsite storage would have cost $376,000, with $125,000 to have the records moved and destroyed, the *Chicago Tribune* reported.[4]

With this in mind, providers would do well to follow information governance practices and follow retention policies while they're in good standing—and ensure records containing personal health information are properly cared for following a facility closure.

Notes

[1] Sachdev, Ameet and Nancy Loo. "Medical records abandoned at former Edgewater Medical Center pose security risk." *Chicago Tribune*. September 19, 2013.

[2] Rice, Linze. "These Photos From Inside An Abandoned Hospital Are The Stuff of Nightmares." *DNAInfo*. December 28, 2016.

[3] Sheber, Sarah. "Medical Records Abandoned, Rotting in Shuttered Chicago Hospital," *Journal of AHIMA*. September 20, 2013.

[4] Sachdev, Ameet and Nancy Loo. "Medical records abandoned at former Edgewater Medical Center pose security risk."

This photo from 2011 shows how nine years after the Edgewater Medical Center closed medical records still remained unsecured and stacked in huge piles on the facility's floor. Steps have since been taken by the property owners to remove the medical records, though a December 2016 news report states that some records still remain.

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