Managing Privacy in a Social Media World

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By Alan F. Dowling, PhD, chief executive officer

Social media has had a profound impact on recent events, both political and personal. In healthcare, social media is presenting HIM professionals with a quandary about how best to manage information privacy.

More and more people from all walks of life are using social media outlets such as YouTube, Facebook, and blogging. In fact social media played such a large role in the recent protests in Egypt that the Egyptian government shut down access to the Internet and cell phone service.

President Obama urged the Egyptian government "to reverse the actions that they've taken to interfere with access to the Internet, to cell phone service and to social networks that do so much to connect people in the 21st century."

However, many traditional privacy protocols are being disregarded by many of the people who are adopting social media. So, while Mashable.com CEO Pete Cashmore's statement, "Privacy is dead, and social media hold the smoking gun," may seem a bit extreme, its core message has an essential truth and is a direct warning.

Privacy and Social Media

Social media's massive movement of information is creating the potential for improved information availability, but it is also creating the potential for increased information error, abuse, and new legal liabilities in healthcare. As healthcare information demands for near real-time messaging continues to increase, consumers' concerns for their privacy and security also increases. To complicate matters, these communication technologies are evolving in ways that even their creators never imagined.

So, health information managers, the guardians of privacy and security, will increasingly find themselves at the center of a communication revolution that is changing the methods through which health information is demanded and, as a result, transferred. This presents HIM professionals with both a challenge and an opportunity.

The challenge is for HIM to become knowledgeable about the potential and real impact of social media, so as to foster its benefits while simultaneously predicting and blocking its potential threats to information validity, privacy, and security. The opportunity for HIM professionals is to emerge, more strongly than ever, as healthcare's-and society's-acknowledged steward and protector of its valuable health information.

In This Issue

Social media's rapid, pervasive communication style represents both possibility and liability for healthcare organizations, write members of AHIMA's privacy and security practice council. In "Social Media and Healthcare," the authors offer policy recommendations that help protect information accuracy and patient privacy.

Healthcare fraud is the subject of a recent report conducted by the AHIMA Foundation. Experts interviewed in "Stopping Fraud" note that EHR systems must do a better job of deterring fraud, and HIM professionals, with their experience in both clinical processes and information technology, have a role to play.

In the February issue, Casey Holmes described the benefits-and challenges-of using coded problem lists in the EHR. In this issue she furthers the discussion by exploring the benefits of achieving standardized content and form in part 2 of "The Problem List beyond Meaningful Use."

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