

Standards: Solutions or Culprits?

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No other country on earth has as regulated a healthcare system as the US, and no country on earth comes close to our level of health spending. According to one estimate, Medicare regulations span more pages than the notorious Internal Revenue Code.¹

Are all these standards and regulations an inevitable reality in our impossibly complex and bloated system? Are they a symptom of many competing and contradictory incentives? Can we regulate this system into a more understandable, manageable model? Can nongovernmental standards development organizations (SDOs) contribute to a more efficient system? These and other questions are the domain of economists, academicians, and "policy wonks."

As health information managers, we must understand, interpret, and implement governmental and voluntary standards and regulations. This issue of the *Journal* aims to help HIM professionals understand the changing regulatory landscape and be more effective in practice.

HIPAA: It's Here

We begin with a primer on the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996. The long-awaited HIPAA regulations are just now emerging in final form. When complete, their implementation will create a uniform national standard for electronic healthcare transactions. As an example of the scope of impact, consider that the Department of Health and Human Services received more than 40,000 comments on the draft security and electronic signature regulations.

Bonnie Cassidy defines the key purposes and provisions of the act and inventories essential resources in the first installment of the "HIPAA on the Job" series. And our special report "HIPAA: Where to Begin?" includes two perspectives. Anne Zender moderates a panel of experts exploring what HIPAA security standard implementation will mean for health information managers, and Margret Amatayakul describes the context of proposed regulations to protect the privacy of individually identifiable health information.

Complying with HIPAA will take an extraordinary amount of teamwork. We are proud to be a key sponsor of industrywide education, teaming with our Joint Healthcare Information Technology Alliance partners to present national conferences. The first of these was held in March, and an audio seminar series begins in April. AHIMA is also offering a Web training program on its Interactive Learning Campus. (See www.ahima.org for details.) AHIMA's goal is to provide the education that our members need to be part of the HIPAA implementation team.

Voluntary Standards

In "Health Informatics Standards: A User's Guide," Mary Brandt provides a comprehensive overview of the private and voluntary standards development efforts of designated SDOs. Their work is important because HIPAA specifically requires that approved standards be used for electronic transactions. Understanding of the work of the SDOs is critical.

Long term care, increasingly the focus of policy debate and public scrutiny, is the topic of Michelle Dougherty's article "Long Term Care's Prospects for Accreditation." As financing debates ramp up, standards and regulation are sure to follow.

The Last Frontier?

Ironically, the migration of health information to the Web effectively bypasses many of the regulations and standards that govern transactions. For example, vendors that offer personal health records on the Web are not now considered "covered entities" under HIPAA. Sandra Fuller describes the opportunities health information managers find in this new frontier, the

ways AHIMA is helping to position its members, and how the Web is transforming much of what we do as a professional association.

We can approach healthcare information regulations as just another exercise in compliance. But we will miss the forest for the trees. Alternatively, we can approach them as essential steps to moving health information processing from its current state of disarray into a capable system with fitness for use. I certainly hope the industry takes the latter view.

Note

1. Rheinhardt, U. E. "Medicare Can Turn Anyone Into a Crook." *Wall Street Journal* (January 21, 2000).

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