



## Right to Know—Who Sees Your Private Health Information

Have you noticed there's something new to read during your wait in the doctor's office—something besides magazines and the newspaper? That's the case since April 14, 2003.

People using healthcare services in the last year should have noticed a change in the registration process. In all healthcare facilities, such as doctor offices, hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation or urgent care facilities, patients are asked to sign an acknowledgement stating that they were offered or given a copy of that facility's Notice of Privacy Practices (NPP). It's required by a new federal privacy law, often referred to as HIPAA—the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

If you have moved from one state to another, you may have noticed that past protections of your private health-care information (PHI) varied depending on your state of residence. State laws have set the stage. HIPAA introduces a minimum level of protection that all US healthcare providers must apply no matter where they operate.

By law, the NPP must be posted in plain view. It must be made available to you in printed form—and if the facility has a Web site, it must also be posted there.

By signing the acknowledgement, you are showing only that the healthcare provider made the information available to you. You are not stating that you agree with content. Your cooperation in this procedure will help healthcare facilities demonstrate compliance with the law.

After you sign, you don't have to accept a copy of the NPP—but consider what you might learn if you do. The privacy law brings you new rights related to your PHI and how it's handled. The law recognizes that an individual seeking healthcare services implies agreement with the use of their health information for purposes of treatment, payment and general operations. Beyond that you have choices in the uses and disclosures of your information and the NPP will advise you what those are. For example, healthcare organizations want to hear from you if you feel your privacy rights have been compromised. The Notice will tell you who to contact and how to proceed with the complaint process.

It's true that this new procedure is “one more thing” to deal with when you seek healthcare services, but if you can take the time to look over the Notice of Privacy Practices, you might learn more about your healthcare privacy rights.

### HIPAA Quiz Circle true or false

1. Your name and location while in the hospital may not be given out without your consent.

TRUE FALSE

2. Your clergyman or pastor will be able to find you in the hospital even if he does not know that you are there beforehand.

TRUE FALSE

3. Your doctor's office or hospital cannot send information to another doctor's office without your authorization.

TRUE FALSE

4. You have the right to request an amendment to the information about you contained in your medical chart if you believe it is incorrect or incomplete.

TRUE FALSE

5. You have the right to review or obtain a copy of your medical records.

TRUE FALSE

Answers  
1. FALSE. You must specifically ask not to be listed in a hospital's directory if you do not want it known that you are a patient there.  
2. TRUE. Hospitals are able to disclose directory information about patients, including religious affiliation, unless the patient has specifically objected.  
3. FALSE. Your care providers can share your health information with another care provider if there is a reason to believe you will receive care there. (For example, you are referred to a doctor for a consultation or move and go to a new doctor).  
4. TRUE. You may request an amendment if you encounter such circumstances. However, the doctor's office or hospital that owns the medical record may decide not to make the amendment. If that happens, you may write out a statement with your concern that it be made a part of the chart. If the information is disclosed to anyone in the future, your written statement will be included in the records released.  
5. TRUE. With a few exceptions, the HIPAA legislation gives patients the right to review or obtain a copy of their medical information. If it is your doctor's professional judgment that you or someone else might be endangered if that information is released to you, they may withhold permission for you to see the information.

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