
HIPAA Allows Disclosures of Information When Necessary for Treatment

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) Privacy Rule protects the privacy of patients' health information but is balanced to ensure that appropriate uses and disclosures of the information still may be made when necessary to treat a patient, to protect the nation's public health, and for other critical purposes, such as when a provider seeks to warn or report that persons may be at risk of harm because of a patient.

When a health care provider believes in good faith that such a warning is necessary to prevent or lessen a serious and imminent threat to the health or safety of the patient or others, the Privacy Rule allows the provider, consistent with applicable law and standards of ethical conduct, to alert those persons whom the provider believes are reasonably able to prevent or lessen the threat.

Further, the provider is presumed to have had a good faith belief when his or her belief is based upon the provider's actual knowledge (i.e., based on the provider's own interaction with the patient) or in reliance on a credible representation by a person with apparent knowledge or authority (i.e., based on a credible report from a family member of the patient or other person). These provisions may be found in the Privacy Rule at 45 CFR § 164.512(j).

Under these provisions, a health care provider may disclose patient information, including information from mental health records, if necessary, to law enforcement, family members of the patient, or any other persons who may reasonably be able to prevent or lessen the risk of harm. For example, if a mental health professional has a patient who has made a

credible threat to inflict serious and imminent bodily harm on one or more persons, HIPAA permits the mental health professional to alert the police, a parent or other family member, school administrators or campus police, and others who may be able to intervene to avert harm from the threat.

In light of recent tragic and horrific events in our nation, including the mass shootings in Newtown, CT, and Aurora, CO, it is important to be aware that the HIPAA Privacy Rule does not prevent your ability to disclose necessary information about a patient to law enforcement, family members of the patient, or other persons, when you believe the patient presents a serious danger to himself or other people.

What This Means For Counties

Counties should consult the laws applicable to them in Colorado, as well as 42 CFR Part 2 under federal law (governing the disclosure of substance abuse treatment records) to understand their duties and authority in situations where they have information indicating a threat to public safety. Most states have laws and/or court decisions which address, and in many instances require, disclosure of patient information to prevent or lessen the risk of harm.

For more information, contact CTSI at 303-861-0507.