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New privacy regulations curse, blessing at doctors' offices

By Dan Kelley
Staff Writer

Patient's at doctors' offices might have notices that since April 14, they have been filling out a lot more forms, in some cases up to eight pages.

The forms, and the rules that go with them, are mandated by the Health Information Portability and Privacy Act of 1996 or HIPPA. Besides generating plenty of paperwork, they have had fairly broad effects across the health-care field.

Pamela Farrior, owner of the Broad Axe Pharmacy in Blue Bell, said the new rules mean she cannot offer the level of service she used to enjoy giving. The new rules have forced changes in the way she interacts with her customers.

"You have to rethink asking people how they are," Farrior said.

Doctors and pharmacists now have to install privacy barriers between the public and employees, and health-care

providers must keep proof that they have notified their patients of the rules on file for seven years.

In addition, the federal government now mandates that patients grant permission before doctors give out any information on them. Doctors must have permission, for example, to even acknowledge whether patients are under a doctor's care.

"People can no longer pick up glasses or contacts without permission [of the patient]," said Susan Vigilone, the HIPPA compliance officer at Thorpe Bailey WeberEye Associates, an ophthalmology practice in Blue Bell. "It's so time-consuming."

Not all health-care employees are bothered by HIPPA. Linda Derry, office manager for Blue Bell Family Medicine, said her office has always been very privacy oriented. She characterized the changes her office underwent as "a little bit here and there."

Farrior said the coun-

seling room, which she had before regulations required the measure, encourages her clients to disclose more information than they normally would in the store.

Not everything having to do with the new rules has caused complaints in the industry. HIPPA rules mean that the forms that doctors fill out are more uniform across the industry. That aspect means that information that travels between several doctors' offices might be more easily understood. In the past, doctors offices and hospitals often had different ways of collecting and reporting information, which often led to confusion.

Dr. Abbie Leibowitz, founder and chief medical officer at Health Advocate, a Blue Bell based health advocacy firm, said that overall, the rules are meant that overall, the rules are meant to streamline the use of electronic information technology in the health-care field.

"In principle, HIPPA is a very good thing,"

Leibowitz said. "We give people confidence that information is not going to be misused. You used to be able to put on a tie and jacket and go into a hospital and pretend to be a doctor."

Leibowitz, who also served as chief medical officer at Aetna, said that Health Advocate helps fill a gap created by HIPPA. Their business, which has several competitors, entails advocating before HMO's and insurers for patients who have been denied treatment.

"Most times," he said "someone in human resources or the CEO of a small company could try to do whether they could for an employee that was sick. The bottom line is that employers cannot casually go to bat for their employees under the new rules."

With stringent penalties for violating the rules, Leibowitz said employers can now outsource their HIPPA liability to his firm.