

NEW FEDERAL PRIVACY REGULATIONS GIVE PATIENTS MORE CONTROL OVER THEIR HEALTH INFORMATION

ROME – By Monday, April 14, hospitals, physicians and other healthcare providers must be fully compliant with new federal privacy regulations that govern the use and disclosure of patients' protected health information.

“Although patient privacy has always been a top priority at Rome Memorial Hospital, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) strengthens and sets national standards for the privacy of patient's medical information,” said Basil J. Ariglio, vice president finance/support services and chairman of the HIPAA Compliance Committee.

“The HIPAA privacy regulations describe how medical information about you may be used and disclosed and how you can get access to this information,” he explained. “The changes give patients more control over their private medical information.”

The original thrust of HIPAA was to standardize the estimated 400 formats used nationwide for healthcare claims processing. Standardizing electronic transactions are expected to produce cost savings over time through reduced administrative expenses.

Because processing healthcare claims requires the transmission of personal healthcare information, standardized privacy and security regulations were also incorporated into HIPAA.

“Under HIPAA, we can continue to share medical information with doctors, nurses and other hospital personnel to coordinate your medical care. We can use your medical information to bill your insurance company for payment. We can also use your medical information to help us improve our services by reviewing patient data, treatment and outcomes,” Ariglio said.

The hospital's privacy notice describes the various ways the hospital can use or disclose protected health information without prior written authorization from the patient.

“Our patients will see few changes in our current practices because New York State already had strict patient privacy regulations and we have always been committed to safeguarding patients' medical information,” he said.

Mary Deutschman, director of medical records, has been appointed as the hospital's privacy officer to oversee the hospital's privacy practices. According to Deutschman, there are five key areas where HIPAA enhances the patients' control over their personal medical information:

- 1) The hospital must offer patients a copy of its privacy notice fully explaining the hospital's practices and the patients' rights.
- 2) Patients will be given an opportunity to opt out of the hospital's patient directory.
- 3) Patients can amend their medical records if they notice an omission or inaccuracy.
- 4) Patients will be informed how to prevent their demographic information from being used for fund-raising initiatives in support of the hospital.

- 5) Patients will be entitled to an accounting of disclosures listing any non-routine uses or disclosures that are permitted, but don't require written authorization.

HIPAA recognizes that there will be some incidental disclosures, which will continue to be permitted as part of hospital operations, Deutschman noted. For example, sign-in sheets can be used in patient registration, even though patients will see other patient names.

"At five pages, the full privacy notice is comprehensive as required by the HIPAA regulations," she said. "Because of its length, we will also offer patients a HIPAA fact sheet, which more succinctly explains how the privacy regulations affect them."

While the new rules may seem transparent to patients, they've required a significant investment of time and resources for the hospital, according to Ariglio. Over the last two years, the hospital conducted a gap analysis of every department to assure compliance, developed new policies, upgraded computer systems and educated staff about the new regulations.

"Now, we're educating the community," he said. The hospital hosted a media day Tuesday, March 25 to help reporters understand the new regulations. Education sessions are being offered at four of the city's senior housing units. The public is invited to attend a session at the hospital's Residential Health Care Facility at 10 a.m. Thursday, April 17, in the 3 North dining room.