

Fully Involved
March 2011

What Is HIPAA and How Does It Affect Me?

Medical information privacy is an issue that is occasionally encountered by citizens who receive emergency medical care from the Fire District. In a small community the protection and safeguarding of medical information is essential. Fire District 2 has internal privacy policies that work to vigorously protect your medical information before, during and after an emergency. Our District privacy policies are designed to maintain a level of strict confidence between a patient and the professional EMT's and Paramedics who render care.

Many of us would have little care or concern on whether anyone knew about our cut hand or bout with the flu, but other medical information can be a lot more sensitive and threaten your right to privacy. Without your expressed consent we work hard to protect your information from anyone else. This means withholding information from lawyers, research firms, companies, media and even friends and family members. Your consent is essential in releasing any type of medical information either written or verbally. With that being said, I would like to take an opportunity to delve a bit further into our medical privacy practices.

In 1996 the Federal Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) was signed into law. The laws initial intent was to regulate patient information sharing between insurance companies and clearing houses. The law was then expanded in 2003 to regulate the dissemination of patient medical information by emergency service providers such as ambulance companies and Fire Districts. As it stands today HIPAA consists of thousands of pages that explain and detail components of the law. The size and scope of the law continues to create confusion and differing thoughts on interpretation for the public and health care providers alike.

In the Emergency Services realm frustration is often encountered by friends, family, and neighbors when they find that emergency responders can not share medical information. Fire Districts often respond to a call for emergency help and encounter a caring and concerned neighbor or friend who is inquiring about a patients condition. These caring individuals may be frustrated when they receive a non descript reply about their loved one. The intent is not to be rude or disrespectful. Our EMS crews are seeking to protect a patients medical privacy interests and nothing more. Responders will attempt to allow concerned individuals to speak directly to the patient as time and condition allow. If time does not allow we ask that the EMS crew and patient be allowed to focus on rapid

emergency treatment and transportation to the hospital. Our top goal is firmly set on providing excellent care for your loved one, neighbor, or friend.

HIPAA does have a few circumstances in which information must be shared on request. These would include law enforcement requests for information on immediate crimes, public health threat information, workers compensation, and organ donation considerations. Information that is not protected by HIPAA includes radio communications between dispatch and EMS units. The generic information relayed may include address, nature of call, and transport destination, all of which may be items that could be heard on a radio scanner.

Once a patient has arrived at the hospital, registration teams will ask the patient for consent on who they may divulge medical information to. I encourage you and your family to talk about this ahead of time. Simply stated, if you do not want your information discussed with anyone, the hospital will not even acknowledge you are there. Having a plan in place on allowing certain individuals to know your care status will help in the unlikely event that you are ever hospitalized.

Following the provision of emergency medical care the Fire District maintains medical records under lock and key. HIPAA guards and protects the information that is contained in these records. These records can only be released to the treated patient or to a third party with verified patient consent regardless of the circumstances. HIPAA protection can be a nuisance and hindrance at times, but it is designed to protect your information at all times.

More information on your Fire District, visit our web site at WWW.MCFD2.COM or call 360-275-6711.

Question of the month: What was HIPAA originally designed for, and what happened? The first email or phone call that I receive with the correct answer will receive a gift from Starbucks Coffee.

Jeromy Hicks is currently Mason County Fire District 2's community outreach coordinator. With ten plus years of firefighting service including being a paramedic, fire prevention is his passion. Jeromy currently provides assistance with inspections, investigations, and education though out Mason County. He can be reached at 360-275-6711 ext. 2.