

Too Much Information

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To Americans, privacy is certainly considered one of our most cherished rights. Viewers of the television series *Seinfeld* may remember the episode in which George did not want to share his ATM personal identification number with anyone, including his fiancée, even when it was needed to release people trapped in a burning bank. Privacy has several definitions, including freedom from unauthorized intrusion.¹ For business organizations, privacy involves the policies that determine what information is gathered, how it is used, and how customers are informed and involved in this process. We can all agree, to differing degrees, that we value our privacy.

Privacy is integral in the practice of medicine. If there is any doubt about its importance, the implementation of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and its numerous regulations demonstrates the emphasis placed on privacy. Patient privacy extends to medical documentation, billing, and physician communication. However, physicians actually have little privacy in the way we practice our specialty and treat our patients. This information is freely available (or at least for a price).

As many physicians are already aware, certain market research companies track physician prescribing information, utilizing license or Drug Enforcement Agency information. Subsequently, pharmaceutical companies are able to purchase this information to formulate sales and marketing strategies. This sounds fairly innocuous on the surface, allowing companies to effectively utilize their resources and serve the medical community. Very often, however, there is a distinct downside. Armed with this information, pharmaceutical representatives may enter your office and confront you with it, often in a contentious fashion if you do not

favor their particular product. Typical questions and comments include the following: Why don't you write prescriptions for product X? Why has your prescribing of product X declined? You are really hurting my market share. If you do not write more of product X, I will suffer financially. Tell me what I can do for you so that you will write more of product X. This type of interaction is intrusive and makes physicians feel uncomfortable. Has a representative ever made you feel like they had incriminating photographs of you?

You may ask, why permit these individuals to enter my office? I enjoy seeing most of the sales forces, and they can be very helpful and provide educational information. The majority of the representatives are cordial and leave valuable samples for my patients. However, I wish they did not know more about my prescribing habits than I do. Don't physicians get to have their own version of HIPAA?

I offer the following comments to dermatologic pharmaceutical companies. I do not care if you have my prescribing data, but I want my privacy in the office. I call on pharmaceutical companies to share anonymous information from market research companies with their sales forces. Consider supplying the information based on zip code or geographic area. Therefore, representatives can focus their sales efforts in the right locations without ever approaching physicians in an accusatory manner. If these conditions are not acceptable, I make a final request to sales representatives: if you do know all about my prescribing habits, then let us both pretend you don't.

REFERENCE

1. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. 10th ed. Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, Inc; 2002.