

## Would You Please Take a Number?

New regulations are falling on us like rain. Will it be the gentle rain of spring that produces green grass and gorgeous flowers or acid rain that eats away at every structure it touches?

I speak specifically about new regulations from the American government concerning patient privacy. These regulations are designed to prevent unauthorized access to the patient's medical records—a laudable goal.

Unfortunately, somewhere someone appears to have lost perspective concerning the overall effect of these laws. We received our first "final" packet of information on the new regulations several months ago. We immediately started to make the necessary changes to comply. Most of the proposed guidelines were already in place, and the biggest change was in the amount of paperwork generated. After a conscientious effort requiring many hours of auxiliary time, we produced the needed forms. Within a week, new "final" regulations arrived. These required either vast modification of the forms we just typed or elimination altogether and replacement with other forms. It is our understanding that further "final" modification may be necessary before these regulations are in their "final" form next April when the new laws take full effect.

Some of the new regulations are incredibly rational and include specific protections for patient information stored or dispersed digitally. Having been the target of viruses and a potential target of hackers, we have long since learned our lesson and installed appropriate protection. Information on the patient's health should be protected to the de-

gree possible when this information is transmitted over the Internet.

Initial review of these new regulations led to some interesting interpretations. One early concern was that we could not identify patients by name. This led some to believe that we would have to open our waiting room door and point to the individual at their appropriate appointment time. Some wags even suggested the use of devices similar to those in stores where the patient would take a number and line up for service. The gloom and doom suggested by some will probably not happen, and we will get back to our normal daily practices with an extra level of protection for our patients.

Unfortunately, all of this new regulation has a cost, and a great deal of that cost is economic. Eventually this will be passed on to the patient. One understands the need for patient protection ranging from sterilization procedures to privacy, but at what point do these regulations become so economically onerous that it negatively affects the patient's ability to receive needed care?

We hope the balance comes soon and is equitable. In the meantime, take a number.



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