Codify BY AAPC

Health Information Compliance Alert

SECURITY: DON'T LET AN EMERGENCY LEAVE YOUR STAFF IN THE DARK

5 tips will prepare your staff to handle a crisis

Think fast: You're entering information into a patient's medical record and the room goes black. Do you know how to react? Does your staff? You have to make sure your team can tackle emergency situations without losing their cool. Here's help.

1. MIMIC YOUR ELECTRONIC SYSTEM ON PAPER

Take stock of your electronic processes and make sure you have a paper version of that system printed out, suggests **Rick Ensenbach**, senior security consultant with Shavlik Technologies in Roseville, MN.

Tip: "Keep your paper forms in a central location that employees can get to easily when there's a problem," Ensenbach advises. Important: Make multiple copies of these forms now so there's less chance of running out during an emergency, he stresses.

2. CREATE YOUR CHAIN OF COMMAND

"You have to make sure the right staff are ready and able to carry out your emergency plan," points out **Jim Sheldon-Dean**, Director of HIPAA Services at Lewis Creek Systems in Charlotte, VT.

Best bet: Put together a "backup list of people you can call on to help" when there's an emergency, Sheldon-Dean recommends.

Example: If an explosion in your data center sends your tech team to the ER, you have to track down a consultant or other security specialist who's familiar with your setup and can jump right in, he clarifies (see article 6 for more about putting together a call list).

3. PUT YOUR KNOWLEDGE IN A SECURE, CENTRAL LOCATION

You can have a great security strategy, but "if the people who know all your passwords are incapacitated, you have a problem," Sheldon-Dean warns.

You don't want to post your passwords for all to see, but you could find a secure method of storing them so they'll be available to everyone during emergencies. Try this: Work with your tech staff to get all passwords on paper. Then seal that document in an envelope and store it in the company safe, Sheldon-Dean proposes.

Important: Make sure executive management and department leaders know where the passwords are and how to use them, he notes.

4. TRAIN YOUR STAFF TO BE PROFICIENT IN OTHER POSITIONS

Each member of your staff must be skilled in other areas so they can pick up any slack during crises, experts tell **Eli**.

Example: Coach one or two billing experts on how things work in the medical records department and vice versa, Sheldon-Dean clarifies. That way, if no one in medical records is available, a billing staffer can step in.

5. PUT YOUR STAFF TO THE TEST

Whether you plan it out or surprise your employees, you need to test them on your emergency procedures before the real thing happens, says **Walt Culbertson**, a principal at Health Transactions in Jacksonville, FL and WEDI privacy and security co-chair.

"For an hour, make your staff members work on paper only and see how they capture and store patients' information," Culbertson suggests. Note the gaps in your team's response and retrain from there, he adds.
Once that limited test is seamless, open the parameters of the exercise to include several departments. "Document how the process flows and where it breaks down," Culbertson counsels. And pay close attention to how well different departments work together, he adds.

Strategy: Start your test in the areas where patients typically enter, whether that's the waiting room or the ER, Culbertson advises. Then track each subsequent department's performance until you have the big picture, he says.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Preparing your staff to handle emergencies will give them the tools to keep your organization together during any crises - and keep a tight grip on your patients' PHI, experts note. Next: Use the scenarios in article 2 to help your staff recognize and respond to emergencies.