



HEALTHY PEOPLE. HEALTHY COMMUNITIES.

Alonzo L. Plough, Ph.D., MPH, *Director and Health Officer*

Student Role in Maintaining Client Privacy and Confidentiality

As a student intern with Public Health, Seattle & King County, you will have access to Protected Health Information (PHI) for clients receiving services. This handout is to help you understand your role in relation to that protected information.

Client Rights

Under Federal and State law, clients/patients have a right to expect that their protected health information (PHI) will be handled in a manner that protects the privacy and confidentiality of that information. When, as a student, you have access to this information it must be treated in a manner that maintains the confidentiality and privacy of the PHI. This means being aware of the basic policies and procedures Public Health—Seattle & King County has put in place to protect PHI.

Disclosure of Protected Health Information (PHI)

A disclosure is the release, transfer, provision of access to or divulging in any other manner of personally identifiable health information outside of Public Health—Seattle & King County. This includes written, verbal, and electronic information. For the most part, a signed authorization by the client/patient is required before PHI can be disclosed. In some instances PHI is disclosed without the client/patient's signed authorization as a result of various laws such as child abuse reporting. PHI may also be disclosed to other health care providers for the purposes of treatment, payment, and health care operations activities. This means that PHI can be shared with other health care providers in order to assure continuity of care and refer patients for other needed health care services. Information shared for these purposes needs to be the minimum amount of information necessary in order to accomplish the referral or to assure continuity of care. Disclosure of PHI to mental health professionals and other social service agencies requires a signed authorization by the client/patient. **As a student intern, you should always seek guidance from your preceptor or the supervisor at your clinical placement site before you disclose any PHI about any patient.**

Discussions with other providers during the course of providing care in a clinic setting should be done in a low voice, and in a manner that is not easily overheard by others. It is not acceptable at any time to share any PHI with people not related to the client's care. While it is tempting to discuss patients and your recent learning experiences with friends, family and other students, it is illegal to disclose any identifiable PHI to individuals who are not involved in caring for the patient. The penalties for disclosure are steep, and confidentiality must be maintained outside the clinic setting.

Safeguarding Protected Health Information

Health care records and other documents containing PHI should not be left unattended in work areas or on computer screens. Copies of records and records themselves are not allowed off clinic premises.

Research

If you are doing a research project that is going to involve PHSKC clients/patients or their PHI, you need to have your research project reviewed by the PHSKC Research Administrative Review Committee (RARC).

Learning Activities

As a student, you may want to use a client as a case example for verbal or written discussion with a preceptor or seminar group. This is only allowable if you have first removed all 18 of the individually identifiable data elements. For a list of these data elements, see the "General Privacy Terms for Students".

Other Questions

If you have any questions about what constitutes appropriate treatment of Protected Health Information, check with your preceptor or a nursing supervisor at your clinical placement site. Please review the attached "General Privacy Terms for Students" for definitions of privacy terms and concepts.