

Silly government rules are HIPAAcritical

By Rick Maier

“Before we finish, I need you to sign this HIPAA form,” said the dental hygienist, leaving my bib in place to make sure I didn’t go anywhere.

“What am I agreeing to?” I asked.

“That you’ve read this policy,” she replied, handing me two pages of small print. I signed the release without looking at the mind-numbing details.

We both just shook our heads in frustration at another fine example of well-intentioned government regulation gone nuts.

For those of you not yet familiar with the new rules, you are about to get HIPAAized. The 1996 Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) requires health providers, insurers and employers to protect the privacy of all of us helpless citizens. The confidentiality rules were effective April 14, 2003 (one year later for small health plans).

Not even your spouse can have access to your medical information without written authority. The people paying the bills – your employer – cannot get any details unless you release them. Companies must implement new procedures to protect themselves, which can only add more pressure and risk to costs that are already out of control.

Everyone connected in any way to your health will ask you to sign that you have been informed of your rights. HIPAA really stands for Highly Intricate Paperwork in Abundant Amounts.

At some pharmacies you now must stand behind a piece of tape on the floor, giving the person at the counter a few feet of privacy. Doctors’ offices must be discreet about sign-in logs and calling out patient names. Some are assigning numbers and letters to patients in the waiting room.

If we’re going to continue to let bureaucrats restrict our freedoms, let’s do it right. The Feds should require gyms to build stalls around the weight scales in workout areas. It’s no one’s business how out of shape we are. Disparaging comments might damage our self-esteem.

Years ago I was a big supporter of the U.S. government - the finest system ever in the history of the world. But in the last couple decades I believe they (used to be “we”) have gone off the deep end.

I don't remember voting for anyone who said they thought HIPAA (a.k.a. the Kennedy-Kassebaum Act) was a good idea. No one has ever asked me what I thought before implementing all the other silly new tax, workplace and environmental regulations we've seen in the past several years.

Each new government rule is one part good intention, three parts unintended bad side effects. Does anyone read all those disclosures or pay attention to all the notices? Who do you think pays for all this?

Who enforces the HIPAA rules? The Office of Civil Rights, of course. Another bureaucracy that doesn't even have an office in Middle Georgia.

And I'll bet the trial lawyers will have a field day with HIPAA, soon to be known as the High Income Potential for Aggressive Attorney act.

As we enter the next election season, I expect to hear what the candidates plan to do about HIPAA and the growing heap of other intrusive regulations.

Yes, our medical information deserves confidentiality, but that doesn't mean we have to throw common sense out the window.

Rick Maier is treasurer at Wesleyan College and can be reached at www.rickmaier.com.