What resident physicians must know about privacy and confidentiality

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Successful physician-patient relationships are built on the foundation of privacy. The promise of confidentiality is essential in order for patients to feel as though they can be candid about their health.

An education module from the AMA explains that patients will only trust physicians with their personal information if they believe the physician will respect their privacy.

“Privacy and Confidentiality” is one of more than 30 online courses available to medical and surgical residents at residency institutions that have subscribed to the AMA GME Competency Education Program.

Among the program’s experts are several who contributed to the AMA’s Health Systems Science textbook, which draws insights from faculty at medical schools that are part of the Association’s Accelerating Change in Medical Education consortium.

Modules cover five of the six topics—patient care, practice-based learning and improvement, interpersonal and communication skills, professionalism, and system-based practice—within the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education’s core competency requirements. The sixth requirement, medical knowledge, is one that is typically addressed during clinical education.

Understanding HIPAA and privacy

A patient’s privacy is violated when personal information is shared without their permission. This action violates the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and can have serious implications for the violating physician.

HIPAA relates to anyone who has access to protected health information, and the AMA module goes into detail about the five components of the accountability act. There are also privacy and security
aspects to HIPAA. The privacy component protects identifiable patient information that is spoken or recorded in any form, while the security aspect focuses on how electronic records are maintained and protected, as well as for how long they are kept.

The module also explains when patient information can be shared, as well as the certain instances where it is accepted to divulge private information without consent. While these topics and intricacies of HIPAA are addressed, the course also makes clear that residents are not expected to become experts on all things privacy; there are already other professionals within hospitals or health systems who make that a primary responsibility.

Everyone in the medical field should know who in their facility is the right person to talk with when it comes to questions about privacy, be it a chief privacy officer or representative from either the risk management department, compliance department or legal counsel.

Visit the AMA GME Competency Education Program for more information on this and other offerings or to request a demo.