

News in Brief

Editorial Staff

Clinton Institutes New Privacy Rules for Health Records

In response to growing concerns about personal privacy, outgoing President Clinton has issued regulations that will limit doctors, hospitals and insurance companies from sharing confidential health information about their patients.

"Nothing is more private than someone's medical or psychiatric records," Clinton said. "If we are to make freedom fully meaningful in the information age, when most of our stuff is on some computer somewhere, we have to protect the privacy of individual health records."

Until the regulations were issued, there had been no federal law in place protecting the privacy of a patient's health records. Instead, patients had to rely on state laws for protection, which range from comprehensive in some parts of the country to virtually nonexistent in others.

Under the new rules, patients can sign a one-time consent form on their first visit to a health practitioner that allows for disclosures of information for routine matters like billing and treatment. However, they would have to explicitly authorize most other uses of their records.

In addition, patients will gain the right to examine and request corrections to their health records. Employers, meanwhile, will be barred from looking at health information about their employees unless it's directly related to providing health care. Companies and providers that intentionally violate the regulations could face criminal sanctions of up to \$250,000 per violation and 10 years in federal prison.

Privacy advocates and lawmakers applauded the regulations, which are scheduled to go into effect in 2002.

"This will touch nearly every aspect of health care," said Janlori Goldman, the director of the Georgetown University Health Privacy Project. "We have tried for years and years to get these protections, and we have been unsuccessful until now. This is just a huge victory."

"The administration has done much of what Congress should have done," added Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), who led an unsuccessful effort to have privacy regulations passed in the Senate in 1999.

Acupuncture for Stroke Research

The American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine (ACTCM) recently received a California Endowment Grant Award to conduct research into the use of acupuncture to help patients recover after a stroke. The funds will be used in support of the acupuncture and stroke recovery program at the Davies Hospital Acute Regional Rehabilitation Center in San Francisco.

The acupuncture and stroke recovery program is a joint effort of ACTCM and the California Pacific

Medical Center. It began operating in September 1999 and now exists as a hospital-based inpatient program. "We have confidence in the design of our acupuncture trial, and the opportunities for learning are exciting," said Howard Moffet, the program's director.

The California Endowment is the state's largest health care foundation. Since its inception in 1996, the Endowment has awarded more than \$470 million in grant money to community-based organizations in California.

Sixers Center Uses Acupuncture to Relieve Hip Problem

When Matt Geiger, a backup center for the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers, was told he was suffering from tendonitis in his right quadriceps muscle in early December, he accepted the diagnosis without much question. After sitting out five games in a row, however, he began to get skeptical.

"I just knew the weakness I felt in my leg muscle couldn't be from tendonitis," he said.

As a result, Geiger sought the care of an acupuncturist, a chiropractor and a massage therapist to determine what was causing the weakness. He eventually learned that it was not tendonitis, but rather a problem with his hip that was causing the pain and weakness in his leg. After having the hip adjusted and receiving two acupuncture treatments, he reported feeling more comfortable and returned to action December 13.

"It all seems to be helping," he said of the treatments. "I had been waiting for the ability to run and jump to return. I know I'm still a long way away, but at least this is a start."

Herbal Medicine Controls Symptoms of Allergic Asthma

A preparation containing the extracts of 14 herbs appears to be effective against a certain type of allergic asthma. The preparation, MSSM-002, was shown to reduce inflammation and mucus production in the lungs associated with asthma, without causing any adverse effects to the body's immune system.

In the study, a team of scientists led by Dr. Xiu-Min Li of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine studied groups of mice induced with a chemical that caused asthmatic symptoms. According to the researchers, MSSM-002 "virtually eliminated airway hyperreactivity" in the mice and led to decreased levels of mucus and inflammation in the lungs. The herbal remedy was considered to have the same efficacy as dexamethasone, a popular anti-inflammatory medication, but without "the overall immunosuppressive effect."

Li's study appeared in the October 2000 issue of the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*.

California HMO Expands Services to Include Acupuncture

Health Net, one of the largest health plans in California, has announced an expansion of benefits to provide coverage for acupuncture and herbal supplements. Under the new program, Health Net members with HMO benefits may self-refer to an acupuncturist and receive discounts on other complementary therapies.

"Acupuncture and other complementary care therapies have been proven in certain cases to be effective for such conditions as headaches, lower back pain, stroke rehabilitation, postoperative

dental pain, and postoperative and chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, among others," said Jennifer Gutzmore, Health Net's senior vice president. "We are excited to be able to offer these safe and effective treatment options as an alternative to traditional medical treatments."

Health Net's benefits are available to employers offering commercial or Medicare HMO benefits. Qualified employers may choose to add just acupuncture benefits, or both acupuncture and chiropractic benefits.

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