



## ***HIPAA & Research: Frequently Asked Questions***

### **Purpose**

This document provides guidance on many common questions the Research Department receives related to HIPAA. Contact the Privacy Officer in the Compliance Department or [privacy@umhwest.org](mailto:privacy@umhwest.org) if you have additional questions or need assistance applying HIPAA to your research project.

### **FAQs**

1. [Where do I find information on Limited Data Set, and how to De-identify Data?](#)
2. [Who has to follow HIPAA regulations?](#)
3. [When does HIPAA apply to my research?](#)
4. [What do I need to include in my HIPAA authorization?](#)
5. [When do I need to list the FDA in the HIPAA authorization?](#)
6. [Is it okay if the individual gives me verbal authorization?](#)
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8. [How can my research qualify for a waiver of HIPAA authorization?](#)
9. [Does the withdrawal of authorization have to be in writing?](#)
10. [What is a Business Associate Agreement?](#)
11. [Do I need a HIPAA waiver if my project is quality assurance/improvement?](#)

#### **1. Refer to the policy [COMP \(HIPAA\)-34](#)**

NOTE: Even if these identifiers are removed, the Privacy Rule states that information will be considered identifiable if the covered entity knows that the identity of the person may still be determined. [45 CFR 164.514(a)(b)]

#### **2. *Who has to follow HIPAA regulations? Who is not required to follow these laws?***

The entities that must follow the HIPAA regulations are called **covered entities**. [45 CFR 160.102]

Covered entities [45 CFR 160.103] include:

- Health Plans, any individual or group plan, or combination of individual or group plans that provides or pays for the cost of medical care, including health insurance companies, HMOs, company health plans, and certain government programs that pay for health care, such as Medicare and Medicaid.

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p 616.252.6738 | f 616.252.6979 | Hotline 866.990-0111

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- Health Care Providers—provider of medical or health services and any other person or organization who conduct certain business electronically, such as electronically billing your health insurance. This includes most doctors, clinics, hospitals, psychologists, chiropractors, nursing homes, pharmacies, and dentists.
- Health Care Clearinghouses—public or private entity, including a billing service, repricing company, community health management information system or community health information systems that process nonstandard health information they receive from another entity into a standard (i.e., standard electronic format or data content), or vice versa.

Under the HITECH Act (enacted as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of (2009), **business associates** (discussed in Question 10) must also comply with HIPAA regulations.

While many organizations that have health information about individuals do not have to follow these laws, certain other protective laws are applicable to them. Examples of organizations that may not have to follow the HIPAA Privacy and Security Rules include:

- life insurers
- employers
- workers compensation carriers
- many schools and school districts
- many state agencies like child protective service agencies
- many law enforcement agencies
- many municipal offices

### **3. When does HIPAA apply to my research?**

HIPAA applies to your research anytime you are accessing, using, recording, and/or receiving identifiable patient information from a covered entity. The key word here is “identifiable” patient information. If you are receiving a de-identified data set (stripped of all 18 identifiers) then you do not need a waiver or individual authorization from each patient to use the data for research purposes. Also, HIPAA does not apply to your research if it does not involve any health information from a covered entity (e.g. a survey on TV viewing habits at home and the correlation between school tardiness).

Even if you perform a Case Report, which does not meet the definition of a research project, there may still need to be review by the Privacy Board.

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Most of the research conducted at University of Michigan Health – West (UMHWest) (a covered entity) involves the use of identifiable patient information and thus requires either a valid data use agreement, HIPAA waiver, or individual patient authorization to be able to conduct the research. [45 CFR 164 Subpart E]

**4. What do I need to include in my HIPAA authorization?**

Refer to policy HIM-12

**5. When do I need to list the FDA in the HIPAA authorization?**

Anytime you are conducting a research study or registry investigating the safety and efficacy/effectiveness of a drug or medical device (experimental or FDA approved/cleared) you should list the FDA under who may use or see/share the subjects' protected health information.

**6. Do I have to obtain HIPAA authorization in writing? Is it okay if the individual gives me verbal authorization?**

Obtaining verbal HIPAA authorization is permitted if the Privacy Board and/or Institutional Review Board has waived the requirement to obtain a signed authorization. This alteration is allowable only when certain conditions are met; for example, the research must involve no more than minimal risk. You may still be required to provide an information sheet containing all the required elements of HIPAA authorization to the individual. If verbal authorization will be obtained over the phone, you must read the authorization to the individual. When obtaining verbal authorization, you are still expected to record in your study documents/phone script who provided verbal authorization (individual's or parent/legally authorized representative's name), when (the date), and who obtained it (researcher/research assistant's name). Refer to policy *CR (HRP) 91 Informed Consent in Research*

NOTE: A waiver of documentation is not equivalent to a complete waiver of HIPAA authorization. [45 CFR 164.512(i)(2)(ii)]

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**7. When can I access medical records for recruiting patients and protocol development without a HIPAA waiver or authorization?**

The HIPAA regulations allow medical records to be accessed for reviews preparatory to research without a waiver or authorization, provided certain criteria are met:

- 1) Are preparatory activities include protocol development,
- 2) Identification of prospective research participants, and
- 3) Study recruitment. However, this provision does not permit the researcher to remove information from the covered entity.

A researcher who is an employee or a member of the covered entity's workforce can use protected health information to contact prospective research subjects. However, a researcher who is not a part of the covered entity may not use the preparatory research provision to contact prospective research subjects. [45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(ii)]

Protected Health Information obtained during the preparatory period CANNOT leave the physical location of University of Michigan Health-West

**8. How can my research qualify for a waiver of HIPAA authorization?**

In general,\* a researcher may qualify for a waiver of individual patient authorization if the following conditions below are met:

- The researcher takes steps to minimize a possible breach of confidentiality (i.e. the spreadsheet/database itself and computers are password protected and/or encrypted; the correlation tool or identifiable information in the spreadsheet/database will be destroyed when the research is complete or shortly after accepted for publication; research staff have had HIPAA training).
- The researcher adequately justifies that the research could not practicably be conducted without the waiver or alteration.

NOTE: Stating in your application that requiring individual authorization would take too much time and incur additional cost is not adequate for granting a waiver.

More appropriate examples of justification to consider:

- Scientific validity could be compromised by requiring authorization because only including those medical records for which authorization could be obtained would prohibit conclusions to be drawn or create a bias that may skew the data; or

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- Locating the potential patients would be very difficult due to a significant percentage of the population being studied would be lost to follow-up, relocated or deceased, and including only those able to be contacted may result in the study may not be meaningful or lose statistical power; or
- Ethically it may be best to not contact the individual for authorization because there is increased risk in creating a list of contact information associated with the research study question; or there is a risk of inflicting additional psychological, social, or other harm when contacting the individual about participation or their families in the case of minors

Refer to policy *CR (HRP) 97 Waiver or Alteration of the Informed Consent Process & CR (HRP) 03 Use and Disclosure of Protected Health Information (PHI) for Research Purposes – HIPAA and the Privacy Rule*

\*There are exceptions that do not qualify for granting a waiver, such as recording positive HIV status as part of the research.

[45 CFR Part 164 Subpart E(i) Standard: Uses and disclosures for research purposes; OHRP SACRHP Letter to HHS Secretary January 31, 2008, Recommendations related to waiver of consent]

#### **9. Does the withdrawal of authorization have to be in writing?**

Yes, valid withdrawals must be in writing. This can be an email, a mailed letter, or a fax (see information in footer below). If a participant withdraws from a research study, this does not automatically cancel the HIPAA authorization. [45CFR164.508(c)(2)(i)] Refer to policy *CR (HRP) 03 Use and Disclosure of Protected Health Information (PHI) for Research Purposes – HIPAA and the Privacy Rule*

#### **10. What is a Business Associate Agreement?**

A Business Associate Agreement (BAA) is a legal contract created between an outside person or organization providing services for a covered entity (e.g. UMHWest). A BAA lists the terms and conditions the business associate must follow when using and releasing PHI. Business associates may provide health care services or legal, consulting,

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actuarial, administrative, and financial services for the covered entity. For more information refer to the BAA policy COMP-14.

In most cases, disclosing PHI to an outside researcher for research purposes does not require a BAA. This is because the researcher is not conducting a service for the covered entity and thus the researcher is not considered a “business associate.” Instead, a Data Use Agreement (DUA), study/clinical trial agreement (CTA), waiver, and/or individual authorization may be required depending on the type of research. For more information on Data Use Agreements refer to policy COMP (HIPAA)-34.

Also, a BAA is typically not required with collaborating research institutions, coordinating centers, study sponsors, statistical centers, and data monitoring boards. Instead, the study/clinical trial contract between UMHWest and the collaborating institution or study sponsor considers HIPAA-related privacy and security issues.

[OCR HIPAA Privacy *December 3, 2002 Revised April 3, 2003*] [BUSINESS ASSOCIATES 45 CFR 164.502(e), 164.504(e), 164.532(d) and (e)]  
Refer to policy *CR (HRP) 03 Use and Disclosure of Protected Health Information (PHI) for Research Purposes – HIPAA and the Privacy Rule*

**11. Do I need a HIPAA waiver if my project is quality?**

No. This is covered under the general consent to treatment which is signed by patients at time of service. It allows the use and disclosure of PHI for treatment, payment, and health care operations. Health care operations include various activities that improve the quality of care received (QI and QA projects). [45 CFR 164.506]

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