



Essentia Health

Essentia shares a warning about Social Media Forums

We live in an extremely social world – as evidenced by the popularity of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. And while it’s great to share with friends and family online, Essentia Health’s Organizational Integrity & Compliance Department reminds all staff that there are established guidelines for employee participation in social media forums that aren’t sponsored by our health system.

“We’ve recently seen an increase in the number of conversations that Human Resources and Organizational Integrity & Compliance Department are having with employees related to messages or comments they make on social media, particularly Facebook,” explains Senior Compliance Specialist **Misty Teigen**.

Employees and students who comment on Essentia Health in any manner on a social media site are subject to all other Essentia policies – including, but not limited to, privacy and security of patient information, HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) regulations, state privacy laws and Essentia privacy policies and standards.

To help you understand these concerns more fully, we share an actual event, although we’ve eliminated most details: An Essentia employee working in the Emergency Department of a small community leaves work after her shift, then posts on her Facebook page. “You would not believe some of the things I see. This morning, it was a drunk guy who crashed his snowmobile into a tree. He’s got some broken bones, but he’ll be OK. Good grief!”

No name was used in the post, but unfortunately, an incident like this is usually big news, particularly for a small-town newspaper. From there, it’s easy to figure out who the “drunk guy” was. And there you have it – a HIPAA violation.

If someone can piece together any kind of identification from what you’ve said or posted, you shouldn’t be sharing that information or posting about it.

When in doubt, Organizational Integrity & Compliance Department recommends don’t post and don’t share.

Mistaken online beliefs

Courtesy of HIVE Strategies, we share three mistaken beliefs that can lead to HIPAA violations:

Mistaken belief 1: Communication is private. No one will see it except the intended recipient.

Reality: When you post something on any social media site, remember it could end up anywhere. Even private posts are not private.

Mistaken belief 2: I can delete my post. Then, no one else will see it.

Reality: Server farms are always scouring the web, preserving every scrap of information. Even if you post something, then delete it a few minutes later, it’s still alive in the digital world.

Mistaken belief 3: It’s OK if I talk about patient on Facebook or Twitter as long as I don’t use their name.

Reality: Under HIPAA, patient information is safe only when it is stripped of 18 identifiers. In small communities, any innocent comment about a patient may help others identify the subject of the post.