A Student Perspective on HIPAA
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With a non-intuitive name like the "Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act" (HIPAA), HIPAA does not immediately convey its overall impact on patients, healthcare providers, and health systems as a whole. As a public health student, I had some working knowledge of HIPAA practices due to required online trainings for research and volunteer purposes. However, when I began working as a 'HIPAA Intern' in Yale's Privacy Office, I quickly realized that I would need a more thorough education on why HIPAA existed and what its role was in patient care. Until that point, I broadly understood that HIPAA was a means of protecting patients' rights to privacy. But was there more to HIPAA than just patient privacy? Why had it been necessary to implement in the first place? And what do we, as health professional students, stand to gain from learning more about the policies and regulations HIPAA mandates?

As students, we are often placed in unfamiliar environments and circumstances for our academic training, challenged to rapidly uptake new knowledge, vocabulary, and policies that will govern our work. And where we may succeed in being able to comprehend our new roles and responsibilities in certain capacities, there may still be a lack of depth and background in what informs the "why" behind our practices. As health professional students, we are bound to encounter HIPAA in the landscape of our learning opportunities, and we may quickly have become familiar with words and phrases, such as "protected health information (PHI)", "patient confidentiality", "patient privacy", and "HIPAA compliance". However, is this enough to be competent in regards to incorporating HIPAA guidelines into our decision-making? Before I began my internship, I had little incentive to develop a more robust understanding of HIPAA implementation. Even as a prior clinical volunteer, I was rarely challenged to determine whether I knew enough about HIPAA to be fully compliant. However, after being assigned a project that would require me to diligently examine HIPAA regulatory language and connect HIPAA policies to Yale's current practices, I soon found myself realizing the scope of HIPAA's influence on healthcare operations and its role in helping to maintain respectful interactions between patients and their healthcare providers.

On one level, HIPAA is first and foremost regulatory in nature, governing what can and cannot be done related to patient information, with the intention of minimizing violations to patient privacy. HIPAA was also intended to maximize individuals' access to health insurance and protection of electronic health records, as well. In some regards, HIPAA could be viewed as "required tedium", and during our training as students, we may not see the significance of certain HIPAA guidelines or implementation strategies. Yet, beyond simply being regulatory, HIPAA also serves as a means for conveying professional integrity as healthcare providers, even during our training. As stewards of sensitive health information, we demonstrate our respect for patients' dignity and commitment to professional responsibility by not only abiding by HIPAA compliant standards, but also by gaining a deeper understanding of the goals of HIPAA as it relates to patient care. As I began learning more about patients' preferences in how their health information is handled, it became clearer to me that the trust we develop with patients (and with each other) is both directly and indirectly tied to HIPAA practices, such as minimizing discussion about patients' conditions and providing reasonable means for private

communication. Our decisions today related to HIPAA compliance and standards may determine the difference between someone experiencing medical identity theft or your healthcare organization being held financially liable for breaches in PHI. If we underestimate the role HIPAA plays in helping us maintain patient trust and professional rapport, we may be at risk of also underestimating both the relational and punitive costs associated with not being careful to properly implement HIPAA standards.

Finally, it is worth noting that, as upcoming health care professionals, our training is also an excellent time to "re-envision" what healthcare could look like in years ahead. Although HIPAA may seem a small component, HIPAA policies and efforts will continue to have an impact on our professional conduct for the foreseeable future. Given this, even as students, we could lend new perspectives on how to develop more efficient patient- and provider-friendly ways to integrate HIPAA policy into our daily workflow. HIPAA was developed in response to needing a better approach to managing patient information, and to ensure that patient privacy would be handled in a safe, confidential, and honoring way. As the next generation of nurses, physicians, PAs, public health practitioners, and allied health professionals, we can expect that HIPAA and HIPAA compliance will remain as standards of our training and practice. As such, learning now how to leverage HIPAA guidelines to better support our work, and to use our creativity to refine practices around HIPAA compliance, will only serve to promote patient well-being - and perhaps ours, as well.