HIPAA Rules Take Effect in April 2003

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), enacted by Congress in 1996, included a wide array of provisions designed to make health insurance more affordable and accessible to all Americans. With support from health plans, hospitals and other health care businesses, Congress included provisions in HIPAA to require the Department of Health and Human Services to adopt national standards for certain electronic health care transactions, codes, identifiers and security. The deadline for implementation of HIPAA nationally is April 2003.

Ensuring the confidentiality of health information is an important emphasis of HIPAA. HIPAA rules limit the use and release of individually identifiable health information; give patients the right to access their medical records; restrict most disclosure of health information to the minimum needed for the intended purpose; and establish safeguards and restrictions regarding disclosure of records for certain public responsibilities, such as public health, research and law enforcement.

HIPAA applies not only to medical care and health insurance, but to medical research as well. The Human Studies Committee at Washington University School of Medicine has been hard at work to ensure that medical researchers will be in full compliance with HIPAA regulations over the coming months. Under HIPAA rules, protected health information (PHI) must be kept to an absolute minimum. Medical researchers must review what PHI is kept in their databases and reduce this information when possible. Various electronic “locks” such as passwords and computer firewalls, among other things, are also being strengthened to prevent unauthorized access to PHI.

For the Memory & Aging Project (MAP) and other studies supported by the Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center, this means that new paperwork and electronic safeguards are now being implemented. Participants in MAP may notice these changes during future visits and are encouraged to ask questions about what HIPAA means to them.