

A Consensus Letter
To the HHS Office of Civil Rights and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
On the Need to Finalize the Proposed Rule to
Expand the Rights of Patients to Access their Test Results

October 16, 2012

The Honorable Kathleen Sebelius
Secretary
United States Department of Health and Human Services

William V. Corr
Deputy Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services

Leon Rodriguez
Director, Office of Civil Rights

Marilyn Tavenner
Administrator, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

Thomas R. Frieden
Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

cc: Todd Park, United States Chief Technology Officer
Farzad Mostashari, National Coordinator for Health Information Technology
Joy Pritts, Chief Privacy Officer, Office of the National Coordinator for Health
Information Technology
Bryan Sivak, Chief Technology Officer, Department of Health and Human Services

Re: *Support for the 2011 Proposed Rulemaking on the CLIA Program and HIPAA Privacy Rule;
Patients' Access to Test Reports, RIN 0938-AQ38*

Dear Secretary Sebelius, Director Rodriguez, Administrator Tavenner, and Director Frieden:

On September 14, 2011, your agencies put forward a proposed rulemaking, RIN 0938-AQ38, which would expand patients' right to access their health records by giving them the right to receive their test results directly from laboratories. **We are writing to voice our whole-hearted support for that proposed rule** and to encourage you to do all in your power to finalize it promptly, so that the current obstacles patients face in gaining access to their test results are removed as soon as possible.

Background. The 2003 HIPAA Privacy Rule gave individuals the crucial right to access their protected health information. The 2009 HITECH Act modernized and broadened patient access rights further by allowing individuals to obtain copies of their records in electronic format. **Unfortunately, however, these access rights have proved illusory when it comes to laboratory test results.** The reason is that the Privacy Rule created an exception¹ from access rights for protected health information maintained by a covered entity subject to the Clinical Laboratory Improvements

¹ 45 CFR § 164.524(a)(iii)(A) (2011).

Amendments of 1988 (CLIA). In addition, regulations issued by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) permit test results to be released only to authorized persons and the individual responsible for using the test results. “Authorized persons” is defined as “an individual authorized *under State law* to order tests or receive tests, or both [*emphasis added*].”²

Because only a few states expressly authorize labs to release test results directly to patients, this regulatory framework prevents patients in all but a few states from having direct access to copies of their test results. The combination of the HIPAA Privacy Rule, the CMS CLIA rule, and state laws thus puts test results in a uniquely restricted category compared to other health information, which greatly impairs patients’ ability to see, save, use, and share their own test results.

The Department’s Proposed Rule. Your proposed Rule would break through this regulatory barricade and grant individuals the right to receive their test results directly from laboratories in all 50 states. The proposed Rule would accomplish this by (a) specifying that, upon patient request, laboratories may provide access to completed test results that, using the lab’s authentication process, can be identified as belonging to that patient,³ and (b) removing the exceptions for CLIA-certified and CLIA-exempt labs from the HIPAA right of access to one’s protected health information.⁴

Your proposed Rule explained that, according to the Health Information Technology Policy Committee, many stakeholders, including some laboratories, public health authorities, electronic health record vendors, health policy experts, health information exchanges, and providers, perceive that these CLIA barriers impede patient access to their records and prevent patients from taking a more active role in their personal health care decisions. You also explained that providing direct patient access to lab results would support our national commitments and goals regarding the widespread adoption of EHRs, robust health information exchange, and greater patient engagement in healthcare.

Our position. We fully support the proposed Rule. Our reasons include:

- First and foremost, granting patients direct and timely access to test results will improve clinical care and patient outcomes. Patients can respond faster and more appropriately when they learn their test results quickly. For example, it is not unusual that the appropriate response to a particular lab result is to make an appointment with a relevant specialist or take other actions. But difficulties in reaching the ordering doctor may unnecessarily delay appropriate next steps, as well as create unnecessary stress during the “phone tag” period.
- Even worse, some patients are being harmed by *never* learning of their lab results. Approximately 7% of clinically significant test results – tests that would have a potential impact on clinical care – are *never* reported to patients, potentially delaying or preventing important treatment decisions and causing harm.⁵ Giving patients direct access to their results would help reduce the number of test results lost entirely.

² 42 CFR § 493.2 (2011).

³ 42 CFR § 493.1291 (2011).

⁴ 45 CFR § 164.524 (2011).

⁵ Casalino LP, Dunham D, Chin MH, et al. Frequency of Failure to Inform Patients of Clinically Significant Outpatient Test Results. *Arch Intern Med.* 2009;169(12):1123-1129.

- We do not think that patients' direct receipt of their own lab results will cause them to suffer undue emotional harm, particularly since a provider can communicate promptly to provide context and interpretation. Some health systems have, in fact, found the opposite to be true; Kaiser Permanente has shown that delivering lab results online directly to patients in a timely fashion improves provider/patient relationships.⁶ In fact, even the availability of clinical notes written by one's physician has been recently shown to have minimal negative effects and significant positive outcomes. The results from three different health systems showed that patients accessed notes frequently, a large majority reported clinically relevant benefits and minimal concerns, and doctors reported a negligible increase in workload. No doctors elected to stop sharing their notes with patients and 99% of patients wanted the practice to continue.⁷
- A common reason for requesting one's lab results is often, somewhat ironically, so that they can be handed directly to a specialist or a new provider, especially when the circumstances are urgent. *Patients can only deliver what they possess.* If patients routinely access and save their lab results, they'll be available quickly in emergencies. As stated recently by Lygeia Ricciardi, acting director of the Office of the National Coordinator's Office of Consumer eHealth, "We want people to think about being empowered with information before that crisis hits."⁸
- The clinical consequences of timely, direct access to one's health information are significant. Todd Park, the federal Chief Technology Officer, recently explained, "When patients have timely access to their records, they can spot errors and omissions, which improves treatment outcomes and helps them avoid unnecessary procedures. Getting access to your own data isn't an abstract thing. It can literally make the difference between life and death."⁹
- The proposed Rule would help save money for our overburdened health care system. When patients cannot easily obtain and save copies of lab results and procedures, and thus cannot quickly share them with other providers, expensive tests and procedures often must be unnecessarily repeated.
- Currently, an exciting development we are seeing in the technology space today is the plethora of consumer-engaging, patient-empowering apps that provide actionable information consumers can use to improve their health. Much of this tech activity has been spurred by our national investment in HIT and EHRs. However, the success of many of these creative solutions hinges on patients having meaningful, practical access to their health data. Keeping crucial lab results excluded from the information patients can access not only hurts them directly, but also will hurt them indirectly by impeding the development of useful tools that could enable them to manage their health more effectively.

⁶ Silvestre, A, Sue, V, and Allen, J, *Electronic Health Records: If You Build It, Will They Come? The Kaiser Permanente Model Of Online Health Care*, Health Affairs, March/April 2009 28:2334-344; doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2

⁷ Delbanco, Tom MD, *Inviting Patients to Read Their Doctors' Notes: A Quasi-experimental Study and a Look Ahead*, Annals of Internal Medicine, Oct. 2, 2012, <http://annals.org/article.aspx?articleid=1363511>.

⁸ Sarasohn-Kahn, Jane, *Health IT Promotion Goes Direct-to-Consumer*, iHealthBeat, Sept. 11, 2012, <http://www.ihealthbeat.org/perspectives/2012/health-it-promotion-goes-directtoconsumer.aspx>.

⁹ Burns, Ed, *ONC looks to make Blue Button public, boost patient engagement*, SearchHealthIT.com, Sept. 12, 2012, <http://searchhealthit.techtarget.com/news/2240163116/ONC-looks-to-make-Blue-Button-public-boost-patient-engagement>

- Finally, as your proposed Rule pointed out, allowing direct access to lab results is entirely consistent with our national emphasis on the importance of patients being more engaged in managing their health. This priority, which has been consistently pursued through HITECH, Meaningful Use incentives, Medicare improvements, veterans' health programs, and other national initiatives, is crucial. Your proposed Rule would fill a gaping hole in patients' ability to access, appropriately respond to, save, and share their health information.

Thank you for issuing this proposed Rule and for considering our comments. We urge you to finalize it quickly. Further delays will not only continue to frustrate and harm patients but also are inimical to our national commitment to patient engagement and a more efficient and effective health system.

The list of those signing this consensus letter is attached.

The Undersigned Support the Consensus Letter In Favor of Finalizing The Proposed HHS Rule Allowing Direct Patient Access to Lab Test Results

First Name	Last Name (and professional credentials, if applicable)	Position (Optional)	Organization/Affiliation (Optional)
Bonnie	Anderson	CEO, Cofounder	Veracyte, Inc.
Misha	Angrist (PhD)	Assistant Professor of the Practice	Duke University Institute for Genome Sciences & Policy
Diana	Autin	Executive Co-Director Executive Co-Director	Statewide Patient Advocacy Network of NJ Family Voices NJ
Daniel C.	Barth-Jones (MPH, PhD)	Assistant Professor of Clinical Epidemiology, Department of Epidemiology	Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University
Jacquelyn	Beals (PhD)	Science Writer/Editor	
Christine	Bechtel (MA)	Vice President	National Partnership for Women & Families
Greg	Biggers	CEO Chief Investigator	Genomera Invoke Health
Rita	Black Monsen (DSN, MPH, RN, FAAN)		
Jason	Bobe	Executive Director	PersonalGenomes.org
Thomas	Bognanno	President and CEO	Community Health Charities of America
William R. ("Bill")	Braithwaite (MD, PhD, FACMI, FHL7)	Consultant	Health Information Privacy and Strategy
Apryl	Brown		Detroit Medical Reserve Corps
Christine	Brown	Executive Director	National PKU Alliance
Ted	Brown (MD, PhD, FACMG)	Director	Institute for Basic Research in Developmental Disabilities

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Brenda	Bryant	Patient Advocate	
Clyde	Bryant		Pierpont Syndrome
Kathleen	Buckley	President	Team Sanfilippo Foundation
Nancye	Buelow	Consumer Advocate	
Don	Burzan	Patient and Patient Advocate	
Hugo	Campos	Cardiac Patient Patient Advocate	
Kenneth	Carter	Co-Founder and Chairman	Noble Life Science, Inc.
Robert	Chase (JD)		Law Offices of Robert S. Chase
Aneesh	Chopra (MPP)	Senior Advisor	The Advisory Board Company
George	Church (PhD)	Professor Founder President	Harvard Medical School Personal Genome Project PersonalGenomes.org
Priscilla	Ciccariello	Co-President	Coalition of Heritable Disorders of Connective Tissues
Amy	Clugston	Founder and President	Syndromes Without a Name USA
Monica	Coenraads	Executive Director	Rett Syndrome Research Trust
Christy	Collins	President	M-CM Network
Brenda	Conger		Cardio-Facio Cutaneous International

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Rhonda	Connolly	President	Children's PKU Network
Donna	Cryer (JD)	President and CEO	American Liver Foundation
Esther	Dyson	Principal	EDventure Holdings
Diane	Edquist Dorman	Vice President of Public Policy	National Organization for Rare Disorders
Muriel	Finkel		Amyloidosis Support Groups, Inc.
Ann	Fonfa	President	Annie Appleseed Project
Stephen H.	Friend (MD, PhD)	President	Sage Bionetworks
Deanna	Frost (PhD)		
Bruce	Gaughran	President	The Kennedy's Disease Association
Shantanu	Gaur		
Brent	Gendleman		5AM
Carole	Gibson Morton	Chair	Alpha-1 Advocacy Alliance
Marie	Godrey (PhD)		Genetics Department, The Johns Hopkins University
Alan	Greene (MD, FAAP)	Founder	DrGreene.com
Adrian	Gropper (MD)	Principal	HealthURL

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Chris	Hafner-Eaton (PhD, MPH, NDc)	Health Science Policy Analyst & Science Writer	National Institutes of Health
John D.	Halamka	CIO	Beth Israel Deaconess
Rebekah	Hamilton (PhD, RN)	Associate Professor	Women, Children and Family Nursing, College of Nursing, Rush University
David	Harlow (JD, MPH)	Principal	The Harlow Group LLC
Helen	Haskell	President	Mothers Against Medical Error
Jamie	Heywood	Co-Founder, Chairman Founder, Former CEO	Patients Like Me ALS Therapy Development Institute
Maggie	Hoffman	Director	Project Delivery of Chronic Care
Kim	Hollander	Executive Director	Oxalosis & Hyperoxaluria Foundation
Kevin	Hughes (MD, FACS)	Surgical Director	Breast Cancer Screening, Massachusetts General Hospital
George	Jesien (PhD)	Executive Director	Association of University Centers on Disabilities
Peter	Kapitein	President	Inspire2Live
Jeffrey	Kaufman	Executive Director	Adenoid Cystic Carcinoma Research Foundation
Donald	Kemper	Founder and CEO	Healthwise
Thelma	King Thiel	CEO	Hepatitis Foundation International
Stephen	Kingsmore (MB, ChB, BAO, DSc, FRCPath)	Director	Center for Pediatric Genomic Medicine, Children's Mercy Hospitals and Clinics

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Sarah	Krüg	President Executive Director	Society for Participatory Medicine CANCER101
David	Lansky (PhD)	President and CEO	Pacific Business Group on Health
Connie	Lee (Psy. D.)	Founder	Angioma Alliance
Deb	Lee Gould (MEd)	Director	FOD Family Support Group
Susan	Levin	President	Lung Cancer Circle of Hope
Howard	Liebers (MPH)	Founder and CEO	MarbleRoad
David	Lindeman (PhD)	Director	Center for Technology and Aging
Michele	Lloyd-Puryear (MD, PhD)	Special Advisor	National Institutes of Health
Martha	Lopez-Anderson	Chair, Board of Directors	Parent Heart Watch
Susan	Love (MD)	President	Dr. Susan Love Research Foundation
Desiree	Lyon	Executive Director	American Porphyria Foundation
Roger	Magoulas	Research Director	O'Reilly Media
David	Margulies (MD)	Executive Director	Gene Partnership, Boston Children's Hospital
Jan	Marshall	Chair, Scientific Advisory Board	Alstrom Syndrome International
Philip	Marshall (MD, PhD)	Healthcare Technologist	Consumer Advocate

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Deven	McGraw (JD)	Director, Health Privacy Project	Center for Democracy & Technology
Darryl	Mitteldoft (LCSW)	Director	The LGBT Cancer Project
John	Mountz (MD, PhD)	J.W. Goodwin Professor of Medicine	Dept. of Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, University of Alabama
Sean	Nolan	Distinguished Engineer	Microsoft HealthVault
Robert	Nussbaum (MD, FACP, FACMG)	Chief, Division of Genomic Medicine; Director, Cancer Risk Program	UCSF Medical Center
Kieran	O'Doherty (PhD)		Department of Psychology, University of Guelph
Tim	O'Reilly	CEO	O'Reilly Media, Inc.
Mary	Pendergast (JD, LLM)		Pendergast Consulting
Heidi	Rehm (PhD, FACMG)	Director	Laboratory for Molecular Medicine, Partners Healthcare Center for Personalized Genetic Medicine
Catherine	Rice	Executive Director	International Essential Tremor Foundation
Michelle	Rintamaki	President/Director	Kids With Heart National Association for Children's Heart Disorders, Inc.
Peter	Robinson (MD)	Professor of Medical Genomics	Institute for Medicinal Genetics and Human Genomics, Berlin, Germany
Dan	Rode (MBA, CHPS, FHFMA)	Vice President, Advocacy and Policy	AHIMA (American Health Information Management Association)
Kari	Rosbeck		Tuberous Sclerosis Alliance

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Wojciech	Rychlik (PhD)		Molecular Biology Insights, Inc.
Lisa	Salberg		Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy Association
Lori	Sames	Executive Director	Hannah's Hope Fund
Daniel Z.	Sands (MD, MPH, FACP)	Assistant Clinical Professor of Medicine Co-Founder and Past President	Harvard Medical School Society for Participatory Medicine
Cindy	Scurlock	Executive Director	Turner Syndrome Society of the United States
Andrew	Spiegel (Esquire)	CEO	Colon Cancer Alliance
Dean	Sproles	CEO	Iverson Genetic Diagnostics, Inc.
Theresa	Strong (PhD)	Strong (PhD)	Foundation for Prader-Willi Research
Robin	Strongin	President and CEO	Amplify Public Affairs
Peter	Suber	Director	Harvard Open Access Project
Sara	Sukalich (MD)	Chair, Board of Directors	Angioma Alliance
Ilene	Sussman	Executive Director	VHL Family Alliance
Katherine	Sutherland (MD)		Women Physicians GYN Medical Group, Inc.
Naz	Sykes	Executive Director	Dr. Susan Love Research Foundation

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Patty	Taormino	Board of Directors	Team Sanfilippo Foundation
David	Tegay (DO, FACMG, FACOI)	Chair, Dept. of Medicine	New York Institute of Technology, New York College of Osteopathic Medicine
Sharon	Terry	President and CEO	Genetic Alliance
Makani	Themba	Executive Director	The Praxis Project
Mark	Thornton (MD, MPH, PhD)	President	Sarcoma Foundation of America
Mascha	Van Dort	Patient Advocate	Inspire2Live
Brian	Van Ness	Director	Medical Genomics, University of Minnesota
Frederick	Varricchio (MD, PhD)		
Jacque	Waggoner	CEO	Hunter's Hope Foundation
Ann	Waldo (JD)	Partner	Wittie, Letsche & Waldo, LLP
Gregory	Weiss		APBD Research Foundation
Jill	Wood	CFO and Co-Founder	Jonah's Just Begun
William A.	Yasnoff (MD, PhD)	Chairman and CEO	Health Record Banking Alliance
Roni	Zeiger (MD)	CEO	Smart Patients, Inc.