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NATIONAL ETHICS NEWS

Changes Proposed to Federal Privacy Rule

The Department of Health and Human Services is recommending changes to the Privacy Rule required under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). The changes are meant to ensure strong privacy protections without unduly hindering access to health care. Specifically, the proposal would eliminate the written consent requirements for disclosing medical information for the purpose of treatment or reimbursement. The proposed changes were published in the *Federal Register*, March 27, 2002. See the *Federal Register* at http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aces140.html, or go to HHS at <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2002pres/20020321.html>.

IoM Releases Report on Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care

The Institute of Medicine (IoM) has released a new report titled *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care*. This report presents strong evidence that racial and ethnic minorities tend to receive lower quality health care than whites, even when insurance status, income, age, and severity of conditions are comparable. Several factors were identified as possible sources of these disparities, including bias, prejudice, and stereotyping on the part of health care providers. The report also contains several recommendations for reducing and eliminating disparities, beginning with a need for increased awareness of their existence among the general public, health care providers, insurance companies, and policy makers. VA's National Ethics Committee issued a report on this same topic last year. The IoM report is available from: <http://www4.nationalacademies.org/onpi/webextra.nsf/web/minority?OpenDocument>. The VA report is available on-line to staff with VA Intranet access at: <http://vaww.va.gov/vhaethics/download/EthnicDisparities.doc>.