



“BUT DOC, I DON’T WANT TO PURGE, CAN YOU GIVE ME A SHOT FOR IT?”

By: William Palisano Lincoln Archives

Frequently, I’m asked to look at old or inactive medical documents (in basements, self storage units, garage’s, barns, and even in airplane hangars!) which can possibly be destroyed. These jobs fall into two main categories: #1 — well organized, and #2 —MAYHEM. Now the cost for the physical destruction of the files is exactly the same, but the prep time and prep costs are dramatically different. Let’s look at #1, and I’ll highlight a simple approach to avoid scenario #2.

- Pack inactive files of the same type with the same retention period (hence, same destruction dates) together. The entire box can be destroyed only when the last file retention date has been met (Remember, a chain is only as strong as its’ weakest link). Write the box number and DESTROY DATE on the front of each box.
- Prepare a list of each box and its’ contents. List should show box number, patient name, medical record number/file number, DOB, etc. and DESTRUCTION DATE. The list can be simple sheets of paper, or in a common computer database (Excel comes free w/ every PC). Make two copies (or print out two copies) of the inventory sheet for each box. Lay the corresponding sheet inside each box on top of the files. Punch holes in the second set of sheets and place in a three ring binder. On the spine of the binder write “INACTIVE FILES.” Now you have an INDEX.
- When the box/boxes is/are moved out of the active file room, list that location on the corresponding inventory sheet, as well as the date box/boxes was/were moved out. Have the courier/maintenance person/gopher/office manager/director sign off that he/she delivered the box/boxes safely. (In smaller offices these might all be the same person! But, people leave their companies. You have to have a good audit trail for the next person filling your position. It’s just plain responsible.) Put the “INACTIVE FILES” binder on a shelf, with the spine facing you.

So now all of your inactive files are “Out Of Your Hair.” What next? On a scheduled basis (monthly, quarterly, annually), brush the dust of the binder and look to see which can be destroyed. Write a memo/order (it should look official) to pull and destroy the boxes BY YOUR BOX NUMBER. Don’t list files to destroy. (If the front end work is complete, there is no reason for staff to open the boxes to verify what’s in it, can it be destroyed? etc., etc.). When your person pulls the boxes, have them pull the sheet out of each and write on it: “DESTROYED: Month/Date/year.” Keep these sheets in a separate section of your binder and pull the main index/inventory sheet.

There will be no need to send a “team” to the off-site location (sometimes for days), to sort out what can be destroyed, when, how, etc., etc. (By the way, how many of us have asked this question once we see a storage area packed to the gills:

“Where in the heck are we going to spread these out to see what we’ve got?”) This is what creates “real costs/big bucks” for a purge, not the physical destruction. Remember, the cost for the physical destruction of the information depends only on volume.

By doing these simple steps you know exactly what you have off-site, when your files/containers can be destroyed and what you’ve already destroyed. Simple? Yes. Common Sense? Yes. Practiced Consistently? _____, sorry for the delay, I was laughing. Take these steps today to avoid real costs, tomorrow. To put it into your terms: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

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