



**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
Veterans Health Administration  
Washington DC 20420**

**IL 10-2004-012**

In Reply Refer To: 10E

**August 26, 2004**

**UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH'S INFORMATION LETTER**

**ONLINE PATIENT-CLINICIAN MESSAGING: FUNDAMENTALS  
OF ETHICAL PRACTICE**

1. This Information Letter provides clinicians and managers with information about ethically sound practices for online patient-clinician messaging in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).
2. Online communication between patients and clinicians can enhance health care relationships and help to promote effective and ethical health care practice. A new report by VHA's National Ethics Committee (NEC), Online Patient-Clinician Messaging: Fundamentals of Ethical Practice, clarifies ethical concerns that arise when patients and clinicians communicate online and offers recommendations for the ethical use of online messaging as a health care technology.
3. This analysis by the NEC underscores the importance of stringent privacy protections for online communication and thus supports current VHA national policy prohibiting the use of Internet-based "e-mail" applications to communicate confidential information (see VHA Directive 2003-025). The report endorses the use of secure, web-based, online messaging and anticipates the professional ethical challenges of implementing secure messaging through the platform of VHA's My Health<sub>e</sub>Vet initiative.
4. To ensure a consistent approach to the use of online patient-clinician messaging throughout the VHA system, clinicians are encouraged to review this report and incorporate its recommendations into policies and procedures where appropriate. The report is available from the National Center for Ethics in Health Care at: [http://vaww.va.gov/vhaethics/resources\\_4.cfm](http://vaww.va.gov/vhaethics/resources_4.cfm).
5. Questions about the report may be directed to Ellen Fox, MD (10E), Director, National Center for Ethics in Health Care, (202) 501-0364.

S/ Jonathan B. Perlin, MD, PhD, MSHA, FACP  
Acting Under Secretary for Health

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