



What does it mean for physician practices?



In 2019, COPIC worked with the Nebraska Medical Association and other health care partners to support the passage of Legislative Bill 119. The bill expanded peer review protections to “professional health care service entities,” such as physician practices, under the Nebraska Health Care Quality Improvement Act (HCQIA).

Frequently Asked Questions

WHY IS PEER REVIEW IMPORTANT?

Peer review is ultimately a way to protect patients and improve the quality of patient care. Under HCQIA, a “peer review committee” includes a quality assessment committee, performance improvement committee, credentialing committee, or other committee established by a professional health care service entity that does either of the following:

- Conducts professional credentialing or quality review activities involving the competence of, professional conduct of, or quality of care provided by a health care provider, including both an individual who provides health care and an entity that provides healthcare, or
- Conducts any other hearing process initiated as a result of a peer review committee’s recommendations or actions.¹

While most of us are familiar with peer review in the hospital setting, a physician practice may establish a peer review committee under the law. But many practices don’t take advantage of the legal protections under the peer review law. When practices are asked if they discuss cases regularly, have M&M, receive patient complaints, or have experience with a physician who may be impaired, often the answer is yes. But when asked whether a practice

has a formal peer review process with policies in place to address these activities, often the answer is no.

Without the legal protections afforded by having these policies and procedures in place, conversations, emails, and text messages about a patient’s care, a patient complaint, or a provider’s professional conduct are not protected under the peer review privilege. They may need to be disclosed in a subsequent lawsuit involving a patient’s care.

WHAT DOES PROFESSIONAL REVIEW INVOLVE?

To conduct peer review pursuant to HCQIA, a professional health care service entity must adopt and adhere to written policies and procedures governing its peer review committee.² COPIC has developed a **peer review checklist** of what is required under Nebraska law as well as **template peer review policies and procedures** to assist practices in establishing their peer review programs (see page 4 for more details). *These template policies should be reviewed by an attorney who can add information specific to the practice.*

The federal HCQIA law applies to both hospitals and group medical practices that provide health care services and follow a formal peer review process for the purpose of furthering quality health care.³

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Nebraska's Peer Review Law

PEER REVIEW FAQs (FROM PAGE 1)

Federal HCQIA grants immunity from damages with respect to actions taken by professional review bodies, to the review body, any member or staff to the body, contractors, and participants, provided they:

- Made a reasonable effort to obtain the facts of the matter,
- Took the action warranted by the facts,
- Took the action in furtherance of quality health care, and
- Followed appropriate notice and hearing procedures that were fair to the physician involved.⁴

Any person who provides information to professional review committees is also immune from damages, as long as that person does not knowingly provide false information.⁵ Nebraska's HCQIA law provides similar immunity for peer review committee members and those providing information to peer review committees as long as they act without malice.⁶

Ideally, medical practices will address any issues through peer review *before* it reaches the stage where they determine that a physician is unsafe to practice. In Nebraska, licensees already have an obligation to report another licensee to the Division of Public Health of the Department of Health and Human Services within 30 days whenever he or she has first-hand knowledge of facts giving him or her reason to believe that another licensee:

- Has acted with gross incompetence or gross negligence,
- Has engaged in a pattern of incompetent or negligent conduct,
- Has engaged in unprofessional conduct,
- Has been practicing while his or her ability to practice is impaired by alcohol, controlled substances, mind-altering substances, or physical, mental, or emotional disability, or
- Has otherwise violated the regulatory provisions governing the practice of the profession.⁷

Peer review allows a more full and fair assessment of a provider, and an opportunity for them to address any educational deficiencies or behavioral health issues so they can practice safely and don't need to be reported to the medical board.

While it is very unlikely that a provider's care will rise to the level of reporting an adverse professional review action to the medical board, a practice's policy needs to address the due process requirements under HCQIA. This allows for a fair hearing for the provider if a professional review committee recommends that the practice's governing board take an adverse professional review action.

The practice will need to identify what peer review activities fall within the policy. Some examples include the review of:

- ✓ Patient safety incidents, including near-misses
- ✓ Unscheduled patient returns
- ✓ Patient complaints
- ✓ Cases identified through screening by quality indicators
- ✓ Reported unprofessional conduct
- ✓ Concerns regarding a possible impaired provider

¹ N.R.S. § 71-7910(1).

² N.R.S. § 71-7910(2).

³ 42 U.S.C. 11151(4).

⁴ 42 U.S.C. § 11112(a).

⁵ 42 U.S.C. § 11111(a)(2).

⁶ N.R.S. § 71-7911.

⁷ N.R.S. § 38-1,125.

Implementing Peer Review at Your Medical Practice



Practices that have successfully utilized peer review under Nebraska’s law and had positive experiences share common themes. Foremost, these practices have developed a culture of understanding that the purpose of peer review is not to hinder or punish practitioners. Instead, they believe it allows them to continually improve the quality of care, treatment, and services provided as well as protect the safety of the patients they treat and ensure the best possible outcomes.

When implementing peer review, it can be important to dispel a common misunderstanding among physicians that all reviews of a physician under HCQIA will be reported to the medical board.

The reality is that they are reported only if:

The findings of an investigation indicate that a physician lacks competence or has exhibited inappropriate professional conduct

AND

The professional review committee recommends an action to adversely affect the person’s membership or privileges with the practice

AND

After a fair hearing process, the governing board takes a *final professional review action* that adversely affects the clinical privileges of the physician for more than 30 days or accepts the surrender or any restriction of clinical privileges while the physician is under investigation or in return for not conducting such an investigation or proceeding.⁸

Recommendations for additional education or treatment for behavioral health issues where there is no final adverse action would not need to be reported. Knowing this enhances the participation of clinicians. The case study on the following page demonstrates how professional review and HCQIA can facilitate the improvement of patient safety protocols within a practice.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

⁸ 42 U.S.C. § 11133(a).

CASE STUDY

A middle-aged patient complaining of a persistent hacking cough a week after recovering from influenza was worked into a busy clinician's schedule during the afternoon. The patient was evaluated and treated with a codeine cough suppressant and told to return if symptoms worsened. Just five hours later, the patient felt much worse and went to the emergency department and was diagnosed with bi-lobar pneumonia and admitted to the ICU due to hypoxia, hypotension, and presumed sepsis.

The peer review committee at the clinic reviewed the medical care and noted that vital signs had not been performed at the time of the clinic visit. Although there is no way to know definitively whether the vital signs would have been abnormal, they presumably would have been and could have provided a clue that the patient was more severely ill than he appeared. The peer committee investigated further and learned that vital signs had not been performed on nearly half of acute visits not just for this doctor, but clinic-wide. They discovered a workflow challenge for acute visits that made it difficult for medical assistants to check vital signs and this system failure was subsequently corrected. Now, nearly 100% of acute visits to the clinic have vital signs checked, which almost certainly has improved patient safety and outcomes.

In this case, and in many other examples, peer review protections have helped clinics—with physicians' buy-in and assistance—identify and address problems to prevent adverse patient outcomes. The medical literature is rich with examples where proactive peer review, such as in the case above, and a culture of patient safety has resulted in a reduction in medical liability claims.

Many practices have found that the protections under HCQIA promote a culture of patient safety and continuous improvement, and when the practices work to educate their practitioners about how and why the peer review process works, they can help facilitate use of this valuable tool.



Peer Review Resources

COPIC promotes professional/peer review as a way to improve medicine in our communities. This process can be used as a tool for improving patient safety as case reviews can provide learning opportunities regarding preventable harm for patients going forward.

In order for physician practices and clinics to use peer review, COPIC's Legal Department has developed state-specific peer review toolkits that contain:

- A **state-specific article** explaining the legal protections for peer review and its practical application for physician practices and clinics
- A **Peer Review Checklist** of what's required (consistent with state and federal peer review laws)
- A sample **Confidentiality Agreement** for peer review participants.
- **Peer Review Policy templates** that a practice can tailor to meet its needs.



Access COPIC's peer review resources on our website at www.callcopic.com/peerreview

Please note: COPIC advises practices to have their own attorney review these materials.