

RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

Cellular Telephone Use in EMS

Emergency medical services have long recognized complete and accurate written documentation as an important part of patient care and legal protection for emergency medical caregivers. However, any verbal communications regarding a patient's condition and/or treatment could be as crucial, if not more so, than accurate written documentation. This makes the ability to capture, store and retrieve verbal communications very important. Advancements in technology and the availability of this technology have made devices such as cellular telephones part of our everyday activities. While cell phones offer a means of convenient communication, they also create new challenges in providing the needed documentation to protect EMS providers and caregivers.

If your agency relies on the use of cellular telephones in place of or to supplement recorded radio communication to discuss patient information with medical control, you should take steps to ensure that these communications are recorded. A lack of recorded communications could prove detrimental to your emergency service organization and/or the individual caregiver if a lawsuit regarding patient care should arise. Without the proof recorded communications can provide, questions regarding patient care, pre-arrival instructions, hospital diversions, changes in protocols and medications or information conflicts to/from on-line medical control would have to be answered very subjectively.

To help reduce this exposure when communicating with on-line medical control, consider the following measures:

- Encourage the use of recorded radio communication whenever possible and practical.
- Consider restricting the use of cellular telephones during on-line medical control communications.
- Make provisions to record any cellular telephone conversations if they will still be allowed and consider the following possible action steps:
 - Route cellular telephone calls to on-line medical control facility through the 911 communications center on a dedicated and recorded line.
 - Have the on-line medical facility dedicate a recorded telephone line specifically for cellular telephone communications.
 - Provide a two-line dedicated phone that allows the incoming EMS call to simultaneously route the call back to a recorder at either the 911 center or emergency service organization.
- Amend protocols to state that direct care providers are to make notations on the patient care reports when non recorded telecommunications are used during patient assessment and/or treatment.

Finally, consult your telecommunications provider or your 911 center management for advice on the most effective and cost-efficient method for recording these calls.