

SPARCS Inpatient De-identified File

Overview

New York State Department of Health
Office of Quality and Patient Safety
Bureau of Health Informatics
November 2013

Health Data NY

Background

SPARCS is a comprehensive data reporting system established in 1979 as a result of cooperation between the health care industry and government. Initially created to collect information on discharges from hospitals, SPARCS currently collects patient level detail on patient characteristics, diagnoses and treatments, services, and charges for every hospital discharge, ambulatory surgery and emergency department visit in New York State.

The enabling legislation and regulations for SPARCS are located under Section 28.16 of the Public Health Law (PHL), Section 400.18 of Title 10 (Health) of the Official Compilation of Codes, Rules, and Regulations of the State of New York (NYCRR).

More information on SPARCS may be found on the New York State Department of Health's website at the following direct link: <http://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/sparcs/>.

SPARCS Data Files

A goal of the Department is to provide the public with easy to use tools to answer health care questions while protecting the privacy of the individual patient. Protecting the privacy of the patient in the collected data is a primary function of the Department of Health SPARCS program staff. SPARCS has assigned personnel whose responsibility is the monitoring of the release and handling of the data. SPARCS utilizes information technology protections for the collection, storage, and release of data.

SPARCS data files are available with and without identifying data elements. A multi-tiered approach in the release of data is utilized to provide patient privacy while still providing useful health care data for the public and researchers. There are three levels of data release: de-identified, limited and identifying.

De-identified: The de-identified data file contains basic record level detail; it does not contain data that is protected health information (PHI) under HIPAA. The health information contained in the file is not individually identifiable; all data elements that are considered identifiable have been redacted. For example, the direct identifiers regarding a date (admission date, discharge date) have the day and month portion of the date removed. The de-identified data file is public under the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL). The de-identified data set allows the public to answer such questions as the number of hospitalizations that occur in the State annually or the annual number of children born in the State's hospitals.

Limited and Identifying: The limited SPARCS data set and the identifying SPARCS data set have increasing levels of identifying patient information. Fees are charged for the limited and identifying SPARCS datasets that reflect the cost of collecting, maintaining, and releasing SPARCS data.

The limited SPARCS data set contains some indirect patient identifiers, such as the month and year of date fields and some geographic identifiers of the patient.

Requests for identifying (deniable) data elements must be approved by an independent Data Protection Review Board (DPRB) and require ratification by the Department of Health Commissioner before data can be released. Researchers are restricted to only the identifying data elements required to conduct their research. In addition, identifying data elements are encrypted and used to make the data elements functional for research while protective of the patient's privacy.

Both the limited and the identifying data sets require applications that clearly state the purpose of the research, the qualifications of the researcher to undertake the research, the security protections of the data, and the protection of the patient's privacy in the release of the final product. Further, data use agreements (legally binding) are required, as part of the application, of both the researcher and the organization. These data use agreements protect the privacy of the patient in the use and release of the data. Regulations contain provisions for penalties for the misuse of SPARCS data by any requestor, as well as addressing issues of releasing the data in aggregated form, secondary releases, etc. Public transparency of the process includes public meetings for identifying data requests and through the publication of the releases of data for both the limited and identifying data requestors.

More information on requesting limited and identifying (deniable) SPARCS data may be found on the DOH website at the following direct link: <http://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/sparcs/forms/index.htm> .

Data Collection Process

Any facility certified to provide Article 28 inpatient services, ambulatory surgery services, emergency department services or outpatient services is required to submit data to SPARCS via the Health Commerce System (HCS). The HCS provides an efficient and secure data transmission option using the powerful Internet Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) encryption technology.

Submitting facilities include New York State Hospitals and Diagnostic and Treatment Centers (D&TC's, commonly known as clinics). This includes both hospital owned and operated, as well as free-standing D&TC facilities. Regardless of their ownership, each facility must report data for each specific facility.

More information on how SPARCS data is collected may be found at the following direct link: http://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/sparcs/data_collection.htm.

De-Identified Data Use Limitations

The de-identified data file contains basic record level detail; it does not contain data that is protected health information (PHI) under HIPAA. The health information is not individually identifiable; all data elements that are considered identifiable have been redacted. For example, the direct identifiers regarding a date (admission date, discharge date) have the day and month portion of the date removed. This data file is public under the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL).

Contact Information

SPARCS Operations
Bureau of Health Informatics
Office of Quality and Patient Safety
New York State Department of Health
Corning Tower, Room 878
Empire State Plaza
Albany, New York 12237

Phone: 518-473-8144
Fax: 518-486-3518

E-mail: SPARCS@health.state.ny.us