information, the quality of care they receive can suffer. (Of course, the ethical consumer must distinguish between keeping medical information "off the record" to protect privacy and hiding information about relevant health conditions or risky behavior from insurance companies. Informed consent is as important a principle for sellers of insurance as it is for consumers. Hiding relevant data can also be fraud.)

In 2001, after years of controversy, the federal government issued comprehensive medical privacy regulations, effective in 2003, covering both electronic and paper records. Before that, various legal and privacy writers described medical-confidentiality laws, passed by the individual states, as "a dizzying array," a "patchwork," and "ambiguous, confusing." Congress' Office of Technology Assessment described the legal situation in the early 1990s as "inadequate to guide the health care industry with respect to obligations to protect the privacy of medical information in a computerized environment. It fails to confront the reality that, in a computerized system, information will regularly cross state lines and will therefore be subject to inconsistent legal standards with respect to privacy." Some aspects of the new federal regulations are big steps forward in medical privacy. For example, medical insurers now must not disclose patient medical information to lenders, employers, and marketers without the patient's consent. Given the enormous variety of kinds of medical information and potential uses of the information, any regulations are bound to have problems. Some medical organizations described the rules, presented and explained in 1500 pages, as "an operational nightmare." Written consent is required for most disclosures of medical information, and health care providers must not disclose more than the minimum amount of information needed for each purpose. Some feared that the heavy civil and criminal penalties for serious violations might cause medical groups to adopt policies that are too restrictive, inhibiting the flow of necessary medical information among the practitioners treating a patient and leading to less-than-optimal patient care. Until the government issued additional clarifying explanations, pharmacists worried that they might not be allowed to give prescription medicines to family members or friends.