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U. Chicago Medical Center Tackles Evolving Threats to the Security of Research, Other Data

By Theresa Defino

In May, the University of Chicago and its affiliated academic health system and medical school announced the receipt of nearly \$35 million in NIH funding to launch the Institute for Translational Medicine (ITM), an initiative created to speed up the typical 14-year period it takes for a medical discovery to go from bench to bedside.

ITM partners also include Rush University, Advocate Health Care, the Illinois Institute of Technology, Loyola University Chicago and NorthShore University HealthSystem.

“We’re all in this together,” said Susan Cohn, a principal investigator (PI) on the ITM grant and the dean for clinical research at the University of Chicago. “Everyone is invited to come to the table, share their voice and come up with creative solutions that we’ll help make a reality.”

Making research itself a reality is a challenge all of its own, as compliance officials well know. This also takes partners attending to various needs such as ensuring spending is appropriate and that trials properly address risks—which include threats to the privacy and confidentiality of not only research subjects’ information but also of study data. At the University of Chicago Medicine, the umbrella name, this task is aided by three separate chief information security officers (CISOs) who operate across facilities, departments and programs, explained Heather Nelson, the chief information officer (CIO) for the university’s medical center.

Individual CISOs serve the medical center (and a community hospital), the Pritzker School of Medicine and the Biological Sciences Division of the university, which includes the physician practice group.

“We have a medical center/health system CISO, who reports to me, a university CISO, and a school of medicine CISO,” said Nelson, adding that she reports to the president of the medical center. Nelson noted that Erik Decker, the medical center’s CISO, also serves as its privacy officer and “supports the clinical research components of the Biological Sciences Division.”

At a recent information security conference cohosted by the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the HHS Office for Civil Rights, Nelson gave an overview of the medical center’s approach to safeguarding research and other data.

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