Patient ID: Rocky terrain

By Rachel Z. Arndt

It makes sense that, when you walk into any healthcare setting, your doctors know who, exactly, you are. But the industry has long struggled to find a fail-safe way to match the flesh-and-blood patient to the patient that exists in the medical record. One solution—one that's been whispered about for nearly two decades—is a national unique patient identifier, a number assigned to each person to keep her medical identity sorted out. Proponents of such an identifier say it would improve patient safety. Naysayers say it would infringe on privacy. The whispers behind a patient identification solution have, in recent years, grown, but they still aren't loud enough to drive universal change. Here, we trace the national patient identifier's uphill battle since it was first mentioned in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996.