

## **LEADING SPACES IN AN TYPE DATA ELEMENTS (RFI 2008-7 June 2009)**

### **REQUEST**

In a situation when leading spaces are not part of an official standard and are not required for the data to be properly interpreted, is it in conformance with the standard for them to be included by the sender in an AN type data element?

Background discussion:

The definition of "String" according to the X12 documentation quoted in Appendix A of the X12N version 4010 Implementation Guides named in the federal HIPAA regulations currently in effect includes the statement that "The significant characters shall be left justified." followed by the sentence "Leading spaces, when they occur, are presumed to be significant characters."

X12N/TG2's HIPAA Interpretation Portal in response to HIPAA Interpretation Request 374 (quoted below) states in part "We conclude that the intent of the wording of this section is that in most cases, leading spaces should not be included. Inclusion of leading spaces is a statement by the sender that the data in a String data element actually requires the leading spaces to be properly interpreted, and that such leading spaces are an official part of the data."

The X12N response to HIR 374 appears to indicate that "when they occur" is referring to the occurrence of leading spaces in a data standard or as being necessary to distinguish two or more otherwise identical values.

Others have interpreted the standard as leaving it entirely to the discretion of the sender whether or not to include leading spaces up to the maximum allowed by the data string length. (The latter interpretation would allow a sender to treat an AN data element as fixed length by padding with leading spaces to the left. In addition, this interpretation would imply that this sentence "The significant characters shall be left justified" can be interpreted as "The significant characters should be left justified.")

(End of request)

### **REFERENCED X12 STANDARDS**

A "Request for Interpretation" applies to a specific version of the X12 Standards. The author failed to provide a specific version of the standard in the request. We have chosen to base this response on Version 6 Release 1 of the X12 Standard. As the areas of the X12 Standards applicable to this interpretation have been relatively stable over time, it is likely that the same interpretation would be provided for earlier versions of the X12 Standards.

X12.6, section 3.5.1.4 says the following with respect to the String data type: "A string data element is a sequence of any characters from the basic or extended character sets and contains at least one non-space character. The significant characters shall be left justified. Leading spaces, when they occur, are presumed to be significant characters."

## **INTERPRETATION**

X12.6 clearly states that leading spaces are to be treated as significant. Significant characters are those that have meaning to the data value.

## **FURTHER DISCUSSION**

The X12C Communication & Controls Subcommittee response for preparing this interpretation not as advice to the submitter of this Request for Interpretation the following observation:

In the quoted standard above, the use of the phrase, "when they occur," means simply what it says: Leading space are considered to be significant when they occur as leading spaces. When they are not there, they are not significant. The sentence would have the same meaning if the phrase were removed.