

A new threat to your medical privacy

Patients are facing a grave threat to their medical confidentiality. From April 1st 2013 there will be a radical change to the way in which the Department of Health¹ collects information about patient health from GP record systems in England.

At present mainly aggregate health data is collected and patients can sometimes opt out of having identifiable information from their own record uploaded to central systems. From April 1st, the newly-renamed NHS Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) will begin uploading identifiable patient information without telling patients how they can opt out of this process – or even that they can.

The data uploaded will include every patient's NHS number, date of birth, postcode and ethnicity, together with details of medical conditions, diagnoses and treatments. It will be held on HSCIC and other NHS systems where it will be used to analyse health trends and demand for services, improve treatment and provide evidence upon which local clinical commissioning groups can base decisions about service provision.

The data will also be made available to outside parties such as researchers and for-profit companies. The HSCIC say that it will be 'anonymised' before release, but the concept of anonymisation is highly controversial and it is unlikely that guarantees can be given about the possible re-identification of the data.

Further, it is quite clear from Department documents that there will be circumstances in which requests for identifiable patient information will be granted. 'Customers' for health data will be approved by a Data Access Advisory Group hosted within the HSCIC, and specific requests for data will be considered by an Independent Advisory Group, also hosted by HSCIC.

Decisions will be made without reference to the patients concerned, and data extracts that have already been gathered by HSCIC may be used for a range of 'secondary purposes'.

For decades medical confidentiality has been central to patients' relationships with their doctors, but this right is about to be removed. Quite aside from the serious security concerns, the creation of a system designed to harvest and pass on the medical details of potentially every person in the country is an unacceptable encroachment on the privileged nature of the GP/patient relationship that will undoubtedly deter those with sensitive conditions from seeking help, putting both individual and public health at risk.

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¹ In fact, the Department of Health's new 'arms-length' body, the NHS Commissioning Board.