Use of email in general practice
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Today's session

We will cover:
• Background
• The Australian privacy principles
• The privacy act
• Reasonable steps
• The privacy and security matrix
Communication flows in primary care

Clinical Communications
Paper Wars

Scanning & Faxing:
A modern day tragedy!
The Outcome...

“Somehow your medical records got faxed to a complete stranger. He has no idea what’s wrong with you either.”

THE AGE
Doctors say patients are dying because of inadequate IT systems
April 22, 2015 - 12:15AM

WILL I BE OK?

The diagnosis from the doctor has been handwritten, then faxed... who would know?
Increasing requests from patients

General practices are increasingly receiving requests from patients, other clinicians and third parties for health information to be sent to them electronically.

In doing so, GPs need to ensure that the ways by which they communicate health information are adequately safe and secure.

As all health information is sensitive by nature, all communication of health information, including via electronic means, must adequately protect the patient’s privacy.
Australian Privacy Principles

“Health information is regarded as one of the most sensitive types of personal information. For this reason, the Privacy Act 1988 (Privacy Act) provides extra protections around its handling”.

The Privacy Act defines health information as:

a) information or an opinion about:
   i. the health or a disability (at any time) of an individual; or
   ii. an individual’s expressed wishes about the future provision of health services to him or her; or
   iii. a health service provided, or to be provided, to an individual; that is also personal information; or

b) other personal information collected to provide, or in providing, a health service; or
The Privacy Act defines health information as cont:

- c) other personal information about an individual collected in connection with the donation, or intended donation, by the individual of his or her body parts, organs or body substances; or

- d) genetic information about an individual in a form that is, or could be, predictive of the health of the individual or a genetic relative of the individual.

As all health information is sensitive by nature, all communication of health information, including via electronic means, must adequately protect the patient’s privacy.
Reasonable steps

General practices should take reasonable steps to make their communication of health information adequately safe and secure.

GPs, health providers and patients should be aware of the risks associated with using email in the healthcare environment.

Reasonable steps cont

- General practices must consider their obligations under the Privacy Act before they use or disclose any health information.
- The Privacy Act does not prescribe how a healthcare organisation should communicate health information.
- Any method of communication may be used as long as the organisation takes reasonable steps to protect the information transmitted and the privacy of the patient.
Reasonable steps cont

- A failure to take reasonable steps to protect health information may constitute a breach of the Australian Privacy Principles and may result in action taken against the organisation by the Australian Privacy Commissioner.

- What amounts to reasonable steps will depend on the nature of the information and the potential harm that could be caused by unauthorised access to it.

Privacy and security matrix

The RACGP has developed a matrix to assist practices in determining the level of security required in order to use email in general practice for communication.
Using email in general practice – privacy and security matrix

**What is secure communications?**

Secure communication is when two entities are communicating and do not want a third party to listen in. For that they need to communicate in a way not susceptible to eavesdropping or interception.
What is Secure Message Delivery (SMD)

An Australian standard (AS5222-2012) developed by the eHealth community

Allows for the transmission of healthcare information between healthcare organisations irrespective of the messaging vendor they are using

Utilises national infrastructure – the HI service

Why not use ordinary email?

The Internet was designed for sharing not with any privacy or security in mind.

There is no security in THE WILD

Use of unencrypted email breaches medical ethics, RACGP Standards and the Privacy Act: penalties up to $1.7 million

Letters sent via ordinary email are not sent from within or received into GPs' clinical software
What is the downside of secure messaging?

- Which health professionals have it?
- How do you know it has been received and read?
- How do you know it went to the right place? (sender errors, system errors)
- Which ones are interoperable? (define what this means!)
- Costs
- Training
- Installation and support
- Acronyms
- **Culture!!!!**

Interoperability

Oh so you are also implementing eHealth?
Other methods of secure communications

Practices need to consider what content is safe and appropriate to send and discuss via electronic messaging. Some methods are listed below:

• Password protected documents or files
• File hosting or cloud storage services
• Encryption software
• Communications via secure website portal
• Secure message or secure message delivery
Who are the Vendors

- Argus
- ReferralNet
- Medical Objects
- Mmex
- HealthLink

RACGP resources

To respond to the emerging use of email in general practice, the RACGP has developed the following resources to assist practices:

- Guiding principles on using email in general practice
- Privacy and security matrix
- Secure communications in general practice – product list
The RACGP survey, *The state of technology in Australian general practice* is to determine the current trends of technology adoption in general practice in Australia.