

NEWS

Electronic patient records are revitalised with new opt-out letter

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The BMA has cautiously welcomed a new opt-out procedure introduced under a new drive to create electronic summary health records for NHS patients in England. The new letter, to be mailed out by primary care trusts, attempts to defuse a long running row over consent by including a postage paid, opt-out form for patients who object to having their details loaded onto the national summary care record.

The summary care record, created as part of the NHS's £13bn (€15bn, \$21bn) national programme for IT in England, makes patients' demographic data, together with details of allergies, adverse reactions, and current prescriptions, available to clinicians across the NHS. Some 5.7 million records have so far been created, with 1.16% of patients opting out, the Department of Health said.

Implementation of the system—originally seen as an uncontroversial “early win” for the IT programme—has been plagued by controversies over confidentiality and consent, with the government insisting that patients be assumed to agree unless they actively opt out. Roll out was suspended last year for a review of the system, which came under additional scrutiny after the change of government.

Officials say that the new letter will “make it easier for patients to exercise choice.” Although the default position is still “yes,” the pack includes an opt-out form that can be posted back for free. Previous opt-out arrangements had required patients to apply in writing for their details not to be uploaded to the system.

Professional and patients' organisations have welcomed the change. The BMA said, “Patients need to be aware that they are able to make a choice, and this is more explicit in the new materials being sent out.” However, the statement continued: “It is important that efforts continue locally to raise awareness.

Practices should only upload patients' records once they are satisfied that public awareness is high enough to allow genuinely informed consent.”

Kieran Mullan, head of strategy at the Patients' Association, also welcomed the inclusion of opt-out forms and said that “it is vital that information and choice is maximised in the future.”

Peter Short, national clinical GP lead for informatics at the health department, said that the view of “critical friends” such as the BMA and Royal College of General Practitioners has “significantly moved forward.”

Meanwhile, another row over the privacy of medical data seemed to be looming when the government announced plans to publish information on the prescribing patterns of individual general practices. A document called *Plan for Growth*, published alongside last month's Budget, proposes that the “government will look to publish prescribing data at practice level subject to an evaluation and impact assessment by the NHS Information Centre.”

Opposition MPs described the proposal as “frightening.” Tom Blenkinsop, Labour MP for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, said, “This is a policy which is being devised in the interest of big pharmaceutical companies at the expense of NHS patients throughout the country.”

A government response to its information revolution consultation for the NHS in England is due to be published this week.

Plan for Growth is at http://cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/2011budget_growth.pdf.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2011;342:d2197