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Audit of GP clinics flags patient privacy risks

Tessa Hoffman | 19 November, 2015 | **0 comments   Read Later**

Lax security measures in GP clinics are putting patients' electronic records at risk of privacy breaches, a government audit has found.

The Office of the Australian Information Commissioner assessed privacy risks to patient information held by seven practices in Victoria and NSW.

It found the clinics – which had between four and 20 GPs — were at medium to high risk of breaching privacy laws when using IT and the MyHeath Record (formerly PCEHR) system, details of which were released in a reported last month.

Last month, *Australian Doctor* reported that GPs and practice staff face jail and fines of up to $108,000 for misuse of the e-health system under controversial laws being pushed through the Federal Parliament.

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Some of the risks identified included:

- Passwords were too weak or not changed often enough and, in some cases, a record of the master copy was kept at the clinic, which was not best practice

- Computers did not have self-locking screensavers turned on

- Passwords to open patients' e-health files were at risk of not being handled or disposed of properly

- Some staff were not aware of their privacy obligations around e-health

- Many policy documents developed by clinics contained incorrect or out-of-date information

- Some staff had access to e-health systems even though they didn't need to

"Best practice is that a master copy of passwords should not be retained. If a master copy of passwords is being retained, this file also should be protected with a strong password or passphrase or by strong physical security," the report said.

The report said there was a low risk that a patient's documents or codes could be used inappropriately, however, this could increase as the uptake of the e-health system increased.

RACGP president Frank Jones said the findings proved practices were not ready for the mooted changes to the eHealth Practice Incentive Program payments, which would see practices forced to upload a set number of health summaries to the system in order to receive the payments.

"The government has not done enough to support practices to prepare for the My Health Record, and is exposing them and patients to risk as it moves to an opt-out model and drives participation through a reformed ePIP with mandatory participation targets," Dr Jones said.

"We urge the government to fix the usability problems first before pushing ahead with the proposal and exposing GPs to risk and patients to possible safety issues."

The report said practices should bolster e-health security by running training for staff, annual risk assessments of electronic health systems and upping security controls on computers.

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