

Editorial

PRIVACY IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

Like you, I recently completed my 2001 census questionnaire. This time around, our household had the honour of being chosen for the long version. We were asked many questions about our working lives, our incomes, the expenses we incur relating to our home — information that would be very valuable to marketers who use large databases to help them target their messaging. We had to place our trust in the assurances of confidentiality given to us by the chief statistician as we sent off our completed questionnaire.

While I returned my questionnaire by mail, others conducted this bit of business by Internet. Returning census forms and filing tax returns electronically is part of a major government initiative to conduct more transactions online. Canada prides itself on being one of the world's most "wired" countries and has committed to being able to conduct much of its interaction with citizens electronically by the year 2005.

If you do an Internet search using the term "electronic service delivery" you will retrieve a wealth of information about the direction of online government worldwide. Whatever document you read, you will see that the issues of confidentiality of information and respect for the privacy of citizens are crucial to the success of electronic commerce and online government.

Information technology is central to the future of health care. If you look at the careers section of major newspapers these days, you will see new types of executive positions advertised. An ad in the *Globe and Mail* of May 9, 2001, sought a president and CEO for a new organization called Canada Health Infoway Inc. The job call indicated that this organization, supported to the tune of \$500 million by the federal government, is "mandated to become a key driver in supporting the new information technology and communications foundations for our health care systems in the 21st century."

Because of the development of large databases and sophisticated marketing techniques, the advent of the Internet, and the centrality of information technology to the future of health care, issues of privacy and confidentiality have become increasingly important to health care providers. For this reason, I asked Dr. Richard Speers, a Toronto dentist, to share his insights on the important issues surrounding the privacy of our patients' health care records. Dr. Speers has taken an interest in this subject for many years and his extensive research and knowledge have been valuable to CDA.

Our organization argued forcibly before the Senate committee examining provisions of Bill C-6, Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act, that any information

gathered by health care providers should not be passed on to secondary users without the informed consent of the patient. Other groups with an eye to facilitating the use of patient information for different purposes took a different angle than CDA and organizations representing physicians. I believe it is the responsibility of dentists to be familiar with Bill C-6 and the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) Privacy Code mentioned in the interview with Dr. Speers. We provide the URL at the end of the article where you can find these documents.

Speaking of information technology and health care, the third article in our series on evidence-based dentistry deals with using the Internet to conduct searches for dental and medical literature. The message from the article is that there is wonderful information available; however, it is probably best to consult sites maintained by reputable organizations.

When I first received the submission on the dental implications of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, I conducted a Medline search on the topic but found very little in the dental literature about this fascinating family of conditions and their major implications for dentists. Just because something occurs relatively rarely in our professional practice doesn't mean that it isn't important. That principle is amply demonstrated in the article by Dr. Furst and co-authors about a rare but sobering consequence of a dental abscess.

Whether we are dealing with the privacy of our patients' records or treating them competently for a dental abscess, we have a duty to earn and maintain the trust that is invested in us.

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