

NEWS

Health data chiefs promise safer, more transparent system to protect patient information

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London, UK

Patient privacy will be protected by a more transparent and scrutinised system for handling health and social care data, MPs have been told.

Repeated assurances were given to MPs during a hostile evidence session of the parliamentary health committee on 1 July for its inquiry into handling of NHS patient data.

The committee quizzed heads of the Health and Social Care Information Centre, the body in charge of health and social care data in England.

Much of the discussion focused on a review published last month, carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers into the centre's predecessor body, the NHS Information Centre, and its handling of data releases.¹

The NHS Information Centre was criticised earlier this year in claims that it sold data to the insurance industry, allowing companies to set prices for cover.

The new review, led by the Health and Social Care Information Centre's non-executive director Nick Partridge, found that the old centre had performed 3059 data releases between 2005 and 2013.

After studying these, the authors concluded there had been "lapses in the strict arrangements that were supposed to be in place to ensure that people's personal data would never be used improperly."

Appearing before the committee, Partridge said: "I hope my report is the first step in rebuilding patient and public trust in the Health and Social Care Information Centre."

Barbara Keeley, Labour MP for Worsley and Eccles South, challenged Partridge's summary of the report, saying: "I think the language you've used is the pinnacle of understatement. This is the most appalling mess."

Partridge replied: "I was reporting the facts as I saw them. It was not to deny or in any way understate the very real concerns about where data goes."

MPs asked if the witnesses could give assurances that all data being released in the future would be used only for healthcare purposes.

Kingsley Manning, chair of the centre, also giving evidence, said: "We have taken on board your concerns and we are renewing and reviewing all of the outstanding agreements."

The centre is currently reviewing 777 such data agreements with all recipients, who would be required to enter into a new agreement for data sharing contracts, a process that is expected to take eight months to complete.

Under the new agreements, there would be more extensive declarations of information, and all applications would be reviewed by a data access advisory group. The group would take into account the Care Act, which insists agreements must be for the benefit of the health and social care systems. There would also be greater audit requirements.

Committee chair Sarah Wollaston, Conservative MP for Totnes, said: "It is staggering . . . that kind of sloppiness from an organisation that is controlling IT."

Manning said: "One of the obvious failures that the review found was that the responsibility for managing releases with the information centre was diffuse, disaggregated, and not consistent or robust. We have reorganised it.

"We are in the process of putting in vastly greater, transparent, publicly scrutinised processes to improve the position. We are making no attempt to wash our hands of this and have taken full responsibility to sort out the mess."

After prompting by MPs who asked why there was no apology in what they called a "devastating" report, Partridge said: "Where we know that things could have been done better in the past and where we know that we should have done, I apologise for that."

1 Health and Social Care Information Centre. Data release review. Review of data releases made by the NHS Information Centre. www.hscic.gov.uk/datareview.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2014;349:g4412

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