Confidentiality in the digital age

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Confidentiality in the digital age

Bradley H Crotty, Arash Mostaghimi

Digital technology introduces new concerns for confidentiality and information security. This review outlines the regulations governing confidentiality and medical privacy and provide practical advice on how to safeguard patient information.

Confidentiality is a pillar of our profession. The patient-physician relationship is built on trust that enables patients to share intimate details. When deciding how to secure and transmit patient information, clinicians must apply professional judgment, informed by policies set forth by regulators and enumerated in local guidelines.

Electronic communication of patient information can facilitate clinical care, while mobile technologies and cloud computing boost productivity. However, these technological innovations introduce new concerns for confidentiality and information security.

We review “practice pointers” for clinicians to help them safeguard patient information in the digital age. We will focus on the professional setting while highlighting best practices for personal technology use. Where applicable, we point out current regulatory mandates, highlight grey areas, and offer practical advice for clinicians.

Recommendations for clinicians

Security awareness
Regularly review guidelines from local medical societies or professional organisations regarding information security.

Personal technology
Use separate passwords for clinical systems and personal web services.
Encrypt any mobile devices used for clinical work, including laptops, tablets, smartphones, external hard drives, and flash drives.
For tablets and smartphones, encrypt devices by using the passcode feature within the device settings.
Disable automatic photo “backup” on devices used to take pictures of patients.

Cloud computing
Before using cloud computing services, assess whether the company offers secure data storage and sign a business associate agreement.

Patient communication
Use secure communication, such as a patient web portal, when communicating with patients.
If a patient requests traditional email over secure alternatives, provide and document informed consent regarding privacy risks and data security.

Social media
Where feasible and appropriate, separate professional use of social media from personal use.
Consider all postings public and permanent, regardless of settings.
Avoid discussing individual cases online without patient permission.

Electronic communication
The use of email has limitations in healthcare. Inside most hospitals, clinicians and associated staff commonly communicate about patient care by email. Once an email message leaves a network, however, its contents generally travel unencrypted through the internet to the recipient, similar to a postcard traveling through the mail. To ensure...
secure data exchange between practices or health systems, organizations are developing secure systems for information exchange.12

Until such systems are more generally adopted, fax machines will still be commonly used to communicate between practices. The use of fax machines is a holdover of past business practices and reflects exemptions from many regulations governing the transmission of electronic data. Online fax services cater to clinicians looking to bridge the gap between fax and email, and clinicians will want to use services that offer encryption and a business agreement that complies with regulations governing protected health information.

Physicians wishing to communicate with patients electronically can now send encrypted messages through commercially available patient web portals and related services. If such services are not available to the patient or the patient does not wish to use them, physicians can exchange information using traditional email, provided the patient knows about the privacy risks and agrees with the plan.13

As access to high speed internet connections expands, clinicians and patients may communicate through videoconferencing. Clinicians can choose from corporate telemedicine solutions to personal technologies, such as Microsoft’s Skype or Apple’s FaceTime, both of which can provide encrypted communication channels. However, regulatory guidance about videoconferencing is limited, and clinicians should work with their practices, in consultation with legal or compliance personnel, to choose a service and develop policies for its use.

Personal devices

The rapid evolution of personal computing increasingly blurs the lines between work and home use, and clinicians now routinely use the same devices for both professional and personal purposes. Although convenient, there is a danger of information breaches if proper safeguards are not used.14 For example, if viruses or malicious software (malware) infect a device, user credentials and other information may be compromised, allowing access to confidential data. It is possible to use personal equipment, but physicians must be constantly vigilant about their device settings and personal usage patterns.

Physicians can take a few simple steps to safeguard data on their personal devices. All mobile devices used for clinical purposes must be encrypted, which involves setting a passcode to access the device. Devices can also be configured to be remotely “wiped” if lost or stolen. Clinicians should assess any new features to ensure that protected health information is not transmitted inadvertently. For example, a clinician who uses his or her mobile device to take a picture of a dermatologic finding should disable any automatic photo sharing through services such as Apple’s Photo Stream, Dropbox, or Google+. Lastly, physicians should avoid unsecured networks, such as free wireless networks in coffee shops, to access sensitive websites on their mobile devices because usernames and passwords may be stolen.

Clinicians who use personal devices for work may wish to separate personal and professional information. For example, many email programs offer a “unified” inbox that allows email from multiple accounts to be viewed in one place. Although convenient, this combination may lead to professional messages being delivered accidentally through a non-secured personal mail account.

Cloud computing

Cloud computing refers to the storage and processing of digital information on remote computer servers.15 This concept includes email storage, file storage, and web hosting, where a user can access the most up to date files through the internet, instead of carrying files locally on USB drives or laptops. Some companies extend cloud computing to facilitate analytic processing of data or the hosting of entire electronic health records on remote servers.

Cloud storage and other services are attractive because of convenience and low cost. The benefits are clear for busy clinicians who want access to their files from any location—home, office, or ward. However, physicians and organizations using cloud computing for protected health information need to assess their compliance with regulations. Business agreements should be in place with any third party companies that will be storing data; the agreements should specify that transmission to and from the cloud is secure and encrypted, and that appropriate user access controls are implemented.15

Social media

Several professional societies, including the American College of Physicians,16 the American Medical Association,17 and the General Medical Council in the UK, have recently published guidance for clinicians on the use of social media.18 These recommendations discuss online physician identity, professional behaviour, and information security. In general, physicians should avoid using social media for direct patient care and contact, given that information may not be stored in an encrypted manner, may be inadvertently accessible to others, and may be controlled by a third party.

Physicians who use social media personally must be careful that they do not inadvertently expose information about patients. For example, blogging or posting the details of a case may allow patients to be identified. We have likened social media to a crowded elevator, where others can easily overhear conversations without the benefit of context.19 Clinicians who want to write about patients online can avoid many problems by securing the patient’s permission to write about his or her story in a public forum.

Physicians can take advantage of social media professionally to promote healthy behaviours among patients.20 Practices may curate web content, or “push” out information about new health guidelines to communities of patients through their online profiles. From a confidentiality perspective, use of such a system would be best left to facilitate conversation around matters of public health or availability of services, rather than matters related to a specific patient. Patients should be given notice that such a system is not meant for clinical communication. If such a system is used, staff should routinely monitor social media accounts; if patients post sensitive information, staff should take these conversations offline and follow up with the patient by telephone.
Conclusions
As clinicians, we are stewards of our patients’ personal information, and we have a professional duty to safeguard such information through the proper use of technology. We must be vigilant about the technology and systems that we use and take precautions to prevent inappropriate disclosure of patient information. As the amount and use of digital information increase, so does the risk of a data breach. Clinicians will be best able to protect information by being cognisant of the basic concepts of keeping data secure. These include device encryption, understanding local policies and regulations about information storage and transfer, and maintaining awareness of the settings on their devices. In areas where guidance is limited, clinicians should consult local experts.

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2 Slack W. The issue of privacy. MD Comput 1997;14:8-11.

RATIONAL TESTING

Using haemoglobin A1c to diagnose type 2 diabetes or to identify people at high risk of diabetes

Eric S Kilpatrick,1 Stephen L Atkin2

A 48 year old man presented to his general practitioner with a 12 month history of fatigue (which he put down to long office hours) and with urinary frequency. He had no previous health problems, his blood pressure was 145/85 mm Hg, and his body mass index was 29. His father had developed type 2 diabetes at the age of 65 years, and his paternal grandmother had been found to have diabetes at the age of about 60 following the development of a gangrenous toe. The patient’s diastolic urine test showed no glycosuria, ketonuria, proteinuria, blood, leucocytes, or nitrates.

What is the next investigation?

All the possible causes of fatigue should be considered, but given the patient’s symptoms and his risk factors for developing type 2 diabetes, including family history and being overweight, a diagnosis of diabetes certainly needs to be excluded. Tests for diabetes are used to evaluate both patients with symptoms (as in this case) and asymptomatic patients who have been identified by a validated risk assessment tool as being at high risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

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This series of occasional articles provides an update on the best use of key diagnostic tests in the initial investigation of common or important clinical presentations. The series advisers are Steve Atkin, professor of medicine, Weill Cornell Medical College Qatar, and Eric Kilpatrick, honorary professor, department of clinical biochemistry, Hull Royal Infirmary, Hull York Medical School. To suggest a topic for this series, please email us at practice@bmj.com

LEARNING POINTS

Haemoglobin A1c (HbA1c) can now be used as an alternative test to glucose concentration for diagnosing type 2 diabetes or identifying people at high risk of developing the disease. Be aware of the conditions in which use of HbA1c would be inappropriate, including suspected type 1 diabetes, pregnancy, acute medical illness, and kidney failure. Also be mindful of conditions that might affect HbA1c, such as abnormal haemoglobinins and anaemia.

Do not routinely test both glucose and HbA1c in the same patient.

Using glucose to diagnose diabetes

Since the early 20th century, the diagnosis of diabetes has been based on the measurement of glucose concentrations in the blood. This usually takes the form of a laboratory measured fasting plasma glucose concentration and, when indicated, a glucose concentration two hours after an oral glucose load. However, “random” (post-prandial) measurement can suffice if it is unequivocally raised, especially in a patient with symptoms. The diagnostic thresh-
Using haemoglobin \( A_1c \) to diagnose type 2 diabetes

As can be seen, measuring glucose in the blood to diagnose diabetes can be inconvenient for patients, as they are usually required to fast overnight; if an oral glucose tolerance test is needed, the procedure is laborious, time consuming, and costly. For this reason, in recent years, more consideration has been given to whether measurement of glycated haemoglobin—haemoglobin \( A_1c \) (HbA\(_{1c}\))—might be a valid alternative to glucose as a diagnostic test for diabetes, although this concept has led to controversy.\(^4\) Quite apart from not requiring a patient to fast overnight, HbA\(_{1c}\) measurement has several other potential advantages over glucose (box 2), including its property of giving an indication of glycaemia over several preceding weeks rather than at a single time point and, partly as a consequence, reduced day to day variation within an individual compared with glucose.\(^5\)

Advances in the global standardisation of HbA\(_{1c}\) measurement culminated in WHO publishing advice in 2011 that recommends an HbA\(_{1c}\) threshold of 48 mmol/mol (6.5%) or above for the diagnosis of type 2 diabetes but does not give specific guidance below this single value.\(^6\) Since then, an expert committee in the United Kingdom, which included seven clinical professional bodies and National Health Ser-

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**Box 1 | Venous plasma glucose thresholds\(^3\)**

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<th>Type of Diabetes</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Diabetes mellitus</strong></td>
<td>Fasting glucose ≥7.0 mmol/L or Two hour post-glucose load ≥11.1 mmol/L or Random glucose ≥11.1 mmol/L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impaired glucose tolerance</strong></td>
<td>Fasting (if measured) ≥7.0 mmol/L and Two hour post-glucose load ≥7.8 to &lt;11.1 mmol/L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impaired fasting glucose</strong></td>
<td>Fasting glucose ≥6.1 to &lt;7.0 mmol/L and (if measured) two hour post-glucose load ≥7.8 mmol/L</td>
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**Box 2 | Advantages of HbA\(_{1c}\) over glucose in diagnosing type 2 diabetes**

- Does not require patients to fast, take a glucose solution (which can sometimes cause nausea), or return for second blood test after two hours
- Assesses glycaemia over previous weeks or months
- Lower biological variability than fasting glucose or two hour post-glucose load concentration
- Fewer pre-analytical concerns, including time to analysis
- Already used to guide management of diabetes
- Standardisation of HbA\(_{1c}\) measurement should help with harmonising results between laboratories

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**Box 3 | When not to use HbA\(_{1c}\) for diagnosis and when to be cautious**

**Do not use HbA\(_{1c}\):**
- All children and young people
- Pregnancy—current or recent (2 months)
- Suspected type 1 diabetes, at any age
- Short duration of symptoms of diabetes (≤2 months)
- Patients at high risk of diabetes who are acutely ill
- Patients newly taking drug that may cause rapid rise in glucose, such as corticosteroids, antipsychotic drugs
- Acute pancreatic damage or pancreatic surgery
- Patients being treated for HIV infection

**Be cautious in requesting or interpreting HbA\(_{1c}\):**
- Patient has or may have abnormal haemoglobin
- Patient is anaemic (any cause)
- Patient is likely to have altered red cell lifespan (for example, post-splenectomy)
- Patient has had recent blood transfusion
rises in HbA1c will lag behind those of glucose. This is why the test is unsuitable in clinical situations such as suspected type 1 diabetes, as well as many of the others described in box 3. Also, most laboratories are able to analyse glucose much more rapidly than HbA1c, so requesting HbA1c could introduce delay in an acute situation. In kidney failure (chronic kidney disease stage 5), the picture is complicated by patients often having a combination of haemolytic, iron deficiency, and chronic inflammation anaemias as well as forming urea derived carbamylated HbA1c, which can also affect some HbA1c analyses. Several treatments for HIV are also known to influence the HbA1c value independently of glycaemia. Measurement of HbA1c is not recommended when determining whether a pregnant woman has gestational diabetes, as it seems to be a poorer predictor of adverse fetal outcome than is glucose.

**Other cautions with using HbA1c**

Although HbA1c should not be used in the situations already described, caution must also be exercised when using HbA1c in the presence of an abnormal haemoglobin or in conditions that may affect red cell survival (box 3). For example, haemoglobin E will form HbEa1c instead of HbA1c, which may lead to an incorrect assessment of HbA1c, depending on the particular measurement method used by the local laboratory. Haemolytic anaemia can cause low HbA1c values compared with glucose measurements, and iron deficiency anaemia can cause a raised HbA1c, although how much influence iron deficiency might have at the diagnostic threshold is not yet clear. After a splenectomy, the lifespan of red blood cells is often increased and so could lead to HbA1c values that are higher than would be anticipated for the level of glycaemia.

HbA1c increases with age beyond what can be explained by any changes in fasting glucose or two hour post-glucose load concentrations, and people with Afro-Caribbean or Asian heritage have higher HbA1c values than do those from Europid descent, which also cannot be accounted for by differences in oral glucose tolerance test results.

However, the relevance of these observations to the use of HbA1c as a diagnostic test remains uncertain.7

**Glucose or HbA1c for diagnosis?**

The diagnosis of type 2 diabetes can be made on the basis of either HbA1c or blood glucose criteria being met. However, these will not identify an identical population of people, as they are not completely concordant with one another.4 For this reason, UK recommendations advise that only one or other test is used to follow the same patient and not a mixture of the two. So if HbA1c shows a patient to be at high risk of diabetes, he or she should be followed up using the same test rather than blood glucose also being measured at the same time or later. The exception is if HbA1c measurement is initially or subsequently identified as being inappropriate for that person, in which case a change to glucose measurement is warranted.

**Laboratory or point of care measurement?**

Several instruments for rapid point of care testing of HbA1c are available for the monitoring of patients known to have diabetes, but most of these analysers do not perform sufficiently well to be used for diagnostic purposes.5 If they are used, the analytical quality needs to be able to match that of clinical laboratories.5

**Outcome**

This patient had his HbA1c measured and found to be 44 mmol/mol (6.2%). As this placed him into the category of being at increased risk of diabetes, he was given lifestyle and dietetic advice and had an assessment of other cardiovascular risk factors. He was asked to report any worsening in his symptoms of diabetes should this happen before the annual HbA1c measurements now planned.

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*Competing interests*: None declared.

*Provenance*: Commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

*Patient consent*: Patient consent not required (patient anonymised, dead, or hypothetical).

*References* are in the version on bmj.com..

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**Who can diagnose Sheehan’s?**

Many years ago near the Turkish-Syrian border, a woman was brought to me by her husband, an illiterate farmer, because she was always complaining of fatigue. Attempts to take her medical history were not very productive, as the patient could speak no Turkish and her husband could speak only a little.

Her thyroid function tests showed secondary hypothyroidism. Further investigations suggested the diagnosis of Sheehan’s syndrome, and her history of postpartum bleeding, provided by her husband, supported the diagnosis. Corticosteroids and thyroxine produced a dramatic improvement, and the patient and her husband were delighted by the treatment.

A few weeks later, I saw the husband again, but this time accompanied by a relative. “Doctor, this woman has the same disease,” he announced. Did this mean I was expected to treat every woman in his village who complained of fatigue, tiredness, or generalised pain with steroids and thyroxine? Nevertheless, I requested tests after a physical examination. It turned out that this patient also had panhypopituitarism, and a similar obstetric history was obtained on further questioning. She received the same treatment as my first patient.

That is how I saw that an illiterate farmer may suspect and nearly diagnose Sheehan’s syndrome based on the symptoms and medical history.

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Patient consent not required (patient anonymised, dead, or hypothetical).

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