

HealthEngine patients' exposure: when on line is out of line

MEDIA RELEASE MONDAY 25 JUNE 2018

The revelation that the doctor appointments company, HealthEngine, has reportedly shared hundreds of patient details with law firms raises disturbing questions about the potential hazards surrounding the privacy and security of on line medical information and of the need for consumer privacy protection to be approached with the utmost care, transparency and due diligence, the Consumers Health Forum said today.

"Patients depending on the convenience of booking a doctor's appointment online are unwittingly being drawn into what appears to be a lawyer marketing scheme, exposing them to unwanted and intrusive approaches," the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

"We are all eager to see our experience of the health system improved by digital solutions: there is much we can all benefit from. Health has lagged behind other services sectors for too long in this regard.

"However it is unacceptable that an online service now being used by so many people to make medical appointments should have failed to declare clearly that patient data would be sent on to claimant law firms for potential injury compensation cases.

"This is a negative development for patients and doctors and a blow to community confidence in the potential benefits use of digital has for the community.

"The company has said in its statement reported on the ABC News website that they only share information about patients and their symptoms when consent is given. CHF seeks assurance that such a consent process is fit-for-purpose and crystal clear about the circumstances under which people are consenting.

"It is one thing to say that personal information 'may be released to providers of products and services of interest to patients', quite another for that to occur under a

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deliberate advertising and marketing program described as a “referral partnership” pilot in the ABC report.

“It should also be a responsibility of doctors who contract with HealthEngine to ensure that patients are protected from unrelated business overtures.

“The transfer of patient information to lawyers is at odds with the measures laid down by the Federal Government to safeguard the proper secondary use of patient data on My Health Record. Similar standards should be followed in this scenario.

“The practice of the firm in seeking information about patient symptoms is a questionable feature given that it can intrude directly into sensitive patient information not normally discussed until the patient actually sees the doctor.

“Why should a booking service seek such information?

“These are serious questions for medical practitioners and their patients and indicate there is fine balance that needs to be struck between reaping the benefits of a digital health future with the rights of patients to privacy and protection of their health information. Consumer confidence and trust is paramount” Ms Wells said.

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