



**Australian  
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Further material available at:  
[http://www.privacy.org.au/Campaigns/E\\_Health\\_Record/HealthElink.html](http://www.privacy.org.au/Campaigns/E_Health_Record/HealthElink.html)

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

### **Hunter patients' privacy at risk**

21 March 2006

"Hunter patients' privacy and personal security will be put at risk", warned Australian Privacy Foundation Chair, Anna Johnston, today.

"Trials of Healthelink, a system of shared electronic health records, are due to start in the Hunter region this Thursday (23 March 2006)," she said.

"Hunter patients will be the guinea pigs for the State, yet their privacy will not be protected to the standards approved by Parliament," she said.

"The Minister for Health quietly changed the law 10 days ago, to exempt the Department of Health from the normal requirement to obtain patients' express consent before adding patients from the Hunter area into this type of system", said Ms Johnston. "Why do Hunter patients deserve less privacy than everyone else?"

The Australian Privacy Foundation, the leading non-governmental organisation dedicated to protecting the privacy rights of Australians, has written to the Minister for Health, urging him to delay the trials until the system is fixed.

"The Australian Privacy Foundation is profoundly disappointed in the design of Healthelink, and in the sneaky way a regulation was made by the Minister, to exempt the trials from the very law designed to protect patients' privacy in electronic health records", she said.

"The Healthelink system has been designed with complete disregard for the law, expert advice, doctor and patient opinion, previous Government promises, and industry practice with regards to protecting privacy and data security," said Ms Johnston.

"The Department of Health plans to automatically enrol eligible patients in the Hunter into a central Healthelink database. Healthelink will then automatically collate those patients' health information from various healthcare services – all without asking for their permission", she said.

"A patient's Healthelink record will include not only summaries of their visits to GPs and hospitals, but also potentially sensitive information such as records of blood tests, consultations with mental health, sexual health and counselling services", said Ms Johnston.

"Patients must then proactively un-enrol themselves if they do not want their records to be viewable by all health practitioners in the area, everyone from dentists to social workers. Yet even then, information about people who 'opt out' will still be kept by the Department of Health", she noted.

"We have called on the Government to do the right thing by Hunter patients – and the people of NSW – and fix these problems before Healthelink is allowed to start", she said.

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