

Privacy price of health test

By ALICE KELLY
Health Reporter

THE NSW Government will bypass privacy laws to test its controversial new electronic health records system on older Hunter patients.

Healthlink will be tested on Maitland, Cessnock, Port Stephens, Myall Lakes and Lake Macquarie residents aged 65 years and over from March 23 and has the potential to provide faster and higher quality care.

Patient records will be shared between Maitland and John Hunter hospitals, East Maitland and Raymond Terrace community health centres and 70 Hunter GPs.

But Australian Privacy Foundation chairwoman Anna Johnston said the system, which automatically collected health records unless patients chose to opt out, meant a variety of health workers and clinics would have access to personal information such as addresses and sensitive health details.



ANNA JOHNSTON

Ms Johnston said there were health benefits to electronic health records but the NSW model was flawed because patients could not ask for sensitive information to be kept confidential.

"If someone can read that you have a broken leg, they can also read that 20 years ago you had a depressive illness, for example," she said.

"Nor does the system allow for the patient to say, I am happy for the hospital or the GP to know

about this, but not my physio-therapist."

Ms Johnston said the Health Records and Information Privacy Act received bipartisan support in 2002 "because it expressly said: Will not precede without patients' express consent", but now the Government was seeking an exemption to the act.

A NSW Health spokeswoman said the exemption would allow the new system to be tested and it would expire in three years.

She said consultation revealed community support for the system and many clinicians said they favoured an opt-out model.

"We want to test the model before any statewide decision is made on whether to adopt an opt-in or opt-out policy," she said.

A NSW Health information sheet described the system as "voluntary" but patients would need to opt out by filling out a form, calling a toll-free number or by asking their GP. The record then became "invisible".



CAP: Security footage of the man in question.

Man wanted for questioning

LAKE Macquarie police have released security footage of a man they wish to speak to over an attempted hold-up of a Charlestown bank.

The man entered the Westpac branch on the corner of Hopetown and Ridley streets about 2.45pm on Thursday, and passed a note to a teller demanding money.

He fled empty-handed after the

teller activated a security screen.

The man was described as being in his mid-20s, about 183 centimetres tall, of thin build, with short, sandy blond hair.

He was wearing a black cap, white windcheater, blue jeans and joggers.

Information can be phoned to Lake Macquarie police on 4942 9999 or Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

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