

# HEALTH PROTECTION AGENCY

## INFORMATION CHARTER

The Health Protection Agency is an independent body that protects the health and well-being of the general population. The Agency plays a critical role in protecting people from infectious diseases and in preventing harm when hazards involving chemicals, poisons or radiation occur. We also prepare for new and emerging threats, such as a bio-terrorist attack or virulent new strains of pathogens.

Therefore if we ask for your personal information we will:

- let you know why we need it
- only ask for what we need, and not collect excessive or irrelevant information
- make sure nobody has access to it who should not
- let you know if we share it with other organisations to give you better public services, and whether you can say no
- only keep it for as long as we need to
- not make it available for commercial use without your permission.

In return, to help us keep your information reliable and up to date, we ask you to, as appropriate

- Give us accurate information
- Tell us as soon as possible of any changes, such as new address.

### **How to find out what personal information we hold about you**

#### **Requests under the Data Protection Act**

You can find out if we hold any personal information about you by making a subject access request under the Data Protection Act (DPA). If we do hold information about you we will:

- give you a description of it
- tell you why we are holding it
- tell you to whom it could be disclosed
- and let you have a copy of the information in an intelligible form.

To help us give you the information you want, we need you to tell us which part of our Agency you have been dealing with and why you believe we hold that information.

The DPA allows us to charge £10 for responding to a subject access request.

#### **When we share information**

We are committed to providing the best and most efficient service to the public. We may share personal information within our organisation or with other bodies where it would not be inconsistent with the purposes for which we collected it, and/or where we are required or permitted to do so by law.

It is essential to respect the rights and the privacy of individual patients but it is also important for the Health Protection Agency to be able to gather information about the levels of infectious diseases and other hazards. This safeguards the well-being of the population as a whole.

The Health Protection Agency works to reduce the impact of infectious disease and other health hazards. With doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals, we monitor the causes of illness and seek the sources of outbreaks of disease. Our primary aim is to prevent disease and the information we collect is vital to the health service. However, data protection legislation and concerns about patient consent make it important that everyone knows how this information is gathered, held and used.

There may be limited circumstances where we share your information with third parties without telling you but this would only be where the law requires it, for example, crime prevention and detection purposes under the Data Protection Act 1998.

## **How we handle personal information**

Health protection staff process all information under medical supervision and are trained to treat any personal details in the strictest confidence, in compliance with the Data Protection Act and NHS Caldicott Guidelines. Our staff have the same duty as other healthcare professionals to maintain confidentiality and deliberate or negligent breaches are disciplinary offences. Individual case reports are shared only with the healthcare professionals caring for the patient and those investigating the source of an infection or outbreak.

Information about patients is anonymised as soon as possible after receipt. It is then put into reports which enable the Agency to examine any patterns and trends of disease. It is impossible to identify individual patients from these reports which are published regularly on the internet at [www.hpa.org.uk](http://www.hpa.org.uk).

The Health Protection Agency commits itself to:

- retain as little named information as possible about individuals at every stage. Many reports made to us do not contain names, and within two years we have usually removed any details that could identify the individual from the information we hold. Exceptions are where long-term follow up is needed, or the law or professional guidance requires longer retention
- work with other organisations in the NHS to reduce the amount of identifying information that is held (for example by using the NHS number instead of the name)
- use the special arrangements already in place to protect the confidentiality of patients seen in sensitive situations such as sexual health clinics
- base its use of information on adherence to the Data Protection Act 1998, the law for notifiable disease and section 251 of the NHS Act 2006 (originally enacted under Section 60 of the Health and Social Care Act 2001)
- follow best practice, for example, compliance with the requirements of the National Information Governance Board
- check the information we hold is accurate and up to date.

## **The training and guidance we give to our staff**

All new staff are given training about data protection as part of their induction, and our intranet provides guidance on all aspects of information handling. The Agency provides general awareness training to all our staff, and those in positions with formal responsibility for information handling receive specific training.

## **How to make a complaint**

If you are unhappy with the way we have handled your personal information and wish to make a complaint, please write to the HPA Complaints Manager. We will acknowledge your complaint within 3 working days and let you have a full response within 20 working days. If it is not possible to respond fully within this timescale, we will write and let you know why and say when you should receive a full response.

## **For more information**

Please write to the:

Public Information Access Office  
Communications Division  
Health Protection Agency -  
61 Colindale Avenue  
London NW9 5EQ

Email: [george.stafford@hpa.org.uk](mailto:george.stafford@hpa.org.uk)

**For independent advice about data protection, privacy and data sharing issues, you can contact the:**

Information Commissioner  
Wycliffe House  
Water Lane  
Wilmslow  
Cheshire SK9 5AF

Phone: 08456 30 60 60 or 01625 524510 Website: [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk)