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Fraud fears as hospitals lose thousands of patient records

Kat Lay, Health Correspondent

August 20 2018, 12:01am, The Times



Patient safety could be at risk after NHS hospitals lost nearly 10,000 paper and electronic records last year

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NHS hospitals lost nearly 10,000 patient records last year, according to figures released under freedom of information

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The mislaid records, both paper and electronic, prompted concerns over the implications for patient safety and data security. Experts warned that sales of such records on the dark web and cases of identity fraud were on the rise, making better protection of patients' data "urgent".

Campaigners said that not having a full record available during a consultation could make it harder for doctors to make an accurate diagnosis or prescribe the correct medication, even though some records were eventually located. Only 68 hospitals released data on missing or lost patient records for the report by the Parliament Street think tank, meaning the scale of the problem is likely to be much bigger.

Barry Scott, of the cybersecurity firm Centrifify, said: "These incidents underline the need to improve security procedures around the management of health records within the NHS. With sales of health records on the dark web and identity fraud on the rise, the need to protect the privacy of patients whilst moving towards secure digital systems is both urgent and essential. The health service remains a top target for hackers and whether their motive is to wreak havoc or steal identities, it's critical that every single patient record is treated as a high priority by health trusts."

Last year the WannaCry cyberattack affected 80 out of 236 hospital trusts across England, largely by exploiting out-of-date computer systems. Although the health service was not directly targeted, health chiefs said it "exposed a need to improve across all parts of the NHS".

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For the new report, hospitals were asked how many times patient records had been recorded as lost or stolen in the last financial year. In total, 9,132 records were reported missing. Responses included incidents where notes were missing at the time of an appointment, whether or not they were later found. One trust said a patient list had been stolen.

Only 16 of the 68 trusts said they had had no cases of lost or stolen patient data. The trust with the greatest number of misplaced records was University Hospitals Birmingham with 3,179. The second was Bolton NHS Trust with 2,163 and the third was University Hospitals Bristol with 1,105.

Joyce Robins, of the Patient Concern campaign group, said: "It is quite dreadful to think a doctor is going to come and treat you and has no records to do it with. It is just ludicrous." She added that she worried people were becoming "blasé" about missing patient records.

Last year MPs said the NHS had "badly failed patients" after a scandal in which at least 708,000 pieces of correspondence were allowed to pile up in storerooms. The affected mail included blood test results, cancer screening appointments, medication changes and child protection notes.

Peter Walsh, chief executive of Action Against Medical Accidents, said: "Missing medical records represent a

significant risk to patient safety. The move to electronic records should help. In theory any NHS service provider should be able to access the same record, but clearly the system isn't reliable enough yet."

The report also found that 94 per cent of NHS trusts still use handwritten notes for patient records despite often having software for keeping electronic records. It recommended that NHS trusts should work to abolish handwritten notes in hospitals and said it was "clear that much more needs to be done to protect the identity and integrity of patient documents".

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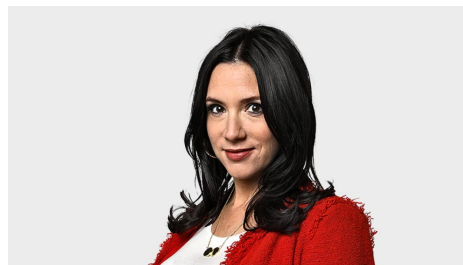
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