

Media release

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Unauthorised access of patient records a breach of trust

SA's leading health consumer organisation has expressed concern that unauthorised viewing of patient records demonstrates a lack of respect for health consumers.

'Health consumers need to be confident that their private medical records will not be accessed by those not authorised to see them,' said Health Consumers Alliance Chief Executive Michael Cousins.

'The recent revelations that at least 21 clinicians have accessed patient records without authorisation demonstrates both systemic and cultural weaknesses in SA's health system.

'Accessing patient records for idle curiosity or for other more serious reasons, such as altering records without authorisation, is not only a breach of professional ethics but of trust.'

Mr Cousins was responding to recent revelations that 21 staff members in SA's public health system had accessed patient records without clearance in the last 12 months.

The breaches were discovered in an audit of patient records.

Mr Cousins said that it was not known how common or rare such breaches were.

'This may be a longstanding problem,' he said.

'Electronic records can be easy to access but they do allow for some inbuilt security that paper records do not necessarily have.

'Judging the extent of the failure in procedure is impossible to gauge without further public disclosure.'

Mr Cousins said that South Australian health consumers needed to be assured that both public and private health providers had stronger safeguards in place to prevent future breaches.

'I expect SA Health to review their policies and procedures in this area and to inform the public of the results and any necessary improvements,' he said.

He suggested that, among other actions, SA Health should consider training which promoted genuine respect for health consumers and for the privacy of their health information.

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