Information: to share or not to share?
Amanda Atkin on what you should know about the Information Governance Review

A recent news item (Vol. 6, No. 15) listed the panel members for the Independent Information Governance Review being chaired by Dame Fiona Caldicott. The aim of the Review is to advise on how to achieve a better balance between protecting and sharing confidential information. With echoes of the opening line of the famous soliloquy in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the Review is entitled ‘Information: to share or not to share?’ If this is the question, what will the review mean for dental practices?

The mandate for the Review arose from a recommendation by the NHS Future Forum (a body independent of government on specific topics) and the Review aims to ‘ensure that there is an appropriate balance between the protection of patient information and the use and sharing of information to improve patient care.’

In the context of dental practices, this is a review around the huge issue of confidentiality of information, which is something dental practices are already aware of the need for. Practices have started to monitor the use of email and to manage how staff share information when a reception area is crowded with patients. The review takes the subject of confidentiality to another level to investigate how the information held in practices but the security of that information/data from an access perspective to data storage on laptops, memory sticks, data servers and discs (to name a few). It also includes the physical security of buildings.

The Terms of Reference for the Review include (to review):
• the information flows needed to support [the current and future purposes for which patient and social care service user information may be used] where they require information which may be identifiable
• when explicit consent for information sharing needs to be sought and recorded, and when may consent reliably be implied and objection/active dissent recorded
• when should anonymised and pseudonymised data be used

As dental practices already have to be compliant with CQC requirements, which also cover elements of information governance such as privacy, dignity, equality and confidentiality, the Review covers those need from a higher, more robust level. Already dental practices are required to undergo the IG Toolkit (Information Governance Toolkit) to embed and ensure staff have a clear understanding of what information governance means for the practice, staff and, most importantly, patients.

Have your say
The Information Governance Review Panel has identified a number of themes it wishes to investigate, with dentistry not mentioned specifically. There is also no dentistry representative on the panel. With this in mind, it would seem important that those in the dentistry profession contribute to the evidence gathering process of the Review. This can be done by post or email – see http://val-dirct2t.fhl.gov.uk/contact-us. The panel is also holding a number of ‘Evidence Sessions’ – each with a particular theme. Again, none are exclusive to dentistry but some themes (eg Patient and Public Rights in law including new EU Regulations) will clearly have a bearing on what goes on in dental practices. The dates and themes can be downloaded at https://www.wp.dh.gov.uk/caldicott2/files/2012/06/Evidence-Gathering-Themes-Dates-130612.pdf

About the author
Amanda Atkin runs Atkinspire Ltd and offers practices support, training and consultancy on information governance, CQC compliance, National Minimum Standards and HTM01-05.

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