

Confidential patient records lost annually



Official statistics showed that at least 1.8 million sensitive papers went missing throughout the health service in just 12 months.

Among the breaches included data security records dumped in public bins and electronic records found for sale on an internet auction site.

Other security lapses involved details of terminally ill patients being faxed to the wrong number, patient records being stolen and posted on to the internet and unsecured laptops being stolen from homes of staff members.

Campaigners today labelled the disclosures as worrying lapses in data protection laws and called for systems across the NHS to be tightened.

Officials at the Information Commissioner's Office, are asking for new powers to conduct compulsory audits on hospitals and NHS trusts.

According to figures compiled from reports of Data Protection Act breaches filed by the ICO over the 12 months from July 2011 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Over that year a total of 1,779,597 records were reported lost in 16 major incidents involving NHS bodies, the Daily Mail reported.

But the real figure is likely to be much higher because in some incidents it was not known exactly how many records were lost. The data protection watchdog also relies on hospitals declaring when data has gone missing.

The Information Commissioner, Christopher Graham, has levied fines totalling almost £1 million on NHS bodies over the past six months, the newspaper reported.

Among those fined include Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Foundation (£325,000 over 69,000 patient records) and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (£225,000 over 100,000 confidential paper records) and Central London Community Healthcare NHS Trust (£90,000 over 59 records).

The worst breach involved a CD containing 1.6 million patient records, including personal details, belonging to Eastern and Coastal Kent PCT.

The CD was lost when a filing cabinet went missing during an office move. The trust was not fined, but signed an undertaking with the ICO not to repeat the error.

“These figures may be shocking, but they will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the NHS's track record for dealing with patient data,” Nick Pickles, of privacy campaign group Big Brother Watch, told the newspaper

"There is a real risk that if the NHS doesn't sort out how it looks after patients' details people will stop sharing information with their doctor and that could be extremely dangerous for care."