

Use of Instant Messaging Tools

Quick Facts on the appropriate use of instant messaging tools



Introduction

Although instant messaging tools are quick and easy to use, they create a number of privacy risks when used to communicate Personal Health Information (PHI). Instant messaging tools are often the least secure communication tools. The risks of interception or errors in sending instant messages are significant. In order to comply with applicable privacy requirements, the use of external instant messaging tools is strictly prohibited.

What is considered an instant messaging tool?

Instant messaging tools allow electronic, written messages to be shared in real-time. A few examples include:

- Short Message Service (SMS) or Multimedia Message Service (MMS) text messages.
- BlackBerry Messenger (PIN-to-PIN communications).
- Online instant messaging applications including WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Twitter, etc.
- Any other similar application that allows for real-time, written communication.

What is Personal Health Information (PHI)?

Personal Health Information (PHI) refers to written or oral information that includes an individual's medical history, including test and laboratory results, payments or eligibility for healthcare, or demographic information (i.e. health card number, name, etc.).

What is my obligation to protect PHI?

The Personal Health Information Protection Act, 2004 (PHIPA) indicates that Health Information Custodians (HICs) are individuals or organizations under PHIPA that, as a result of his or its power or duties, has custody or control of PHI. Physicians, nurses, dietitians, midwives, etc. are all considered HICs.

HICs who have custody or control of PHI must establish and implement information practices complying with PHIPA provisions, including taking reasonable precautions to safeguard PHI.

Can I message another clinician the lab results of a patient if the results include the patient's full name?

No. Patient name is considered PHI. Messaging (either via mobile device or online messaging) is unencrypted.

Can I message another clinician using my mobile device the lab results of a patient if the results include the patient's Medical Record Number (MRN) or Healthcard Number (HCN)?

No. MRN and HCN are considered PHI. Messaging (either via mobile device or online messaging) is unencrypted.

Can I take a picture of a patient's injury or condition and send it by messaging?

If there is no identifying information associated with the image or in the string of message, it is permissible.

Patient name, HCN, MRN, bed and room number are all considered PHI.

Can I message another clinician the health insurance information (i.e. OHIP, Blue Cross, etc) of a patient?

No. The payments or eligibility for healthcare is considered PHI. Messaging (either via mobile device or online messaging) is unencrypted.

Can I message another clinician the name of a patient's substitute decision-maker?

No. Information identifying a patient's substitute decision-maker is considered PHI. Messaging (either via mobile device or online messaging) is unencrypted.