

there is an over-riding public interest or other legal obligation to disclose.” [3] Insurance reports and medical literature destined for a patient’s employer may fall under this category of necessary disclosure.

Do you safeguard confidentiality?

As medical professionals, writing referral letters is a common activity. But what sorts of systems are in place in your clinic? Do you click a button on a software program and watch while entire medical histories are automatically imported into a referral template and sent off into the cloud? Do you check that your patients understand implied consent and explain why disclosure might be beneficial for their healthcare? Are you rigorous and professional in maintaining confidentiality regarding the conditions of patients who are referred to you? Have you thought of how your non-medical and administrative staff fit into the issue of confidentiality?

When disclosing sensitive information in routine referral letters, although healthcare professionals and patients must work together, it’s up to practitioners to guide patient understanding. Ultimately, when it comes to disclosure, patients must not be left in the dark.

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References

- [1] Routine referral letters share clinical data without patients’ consent BMJ 2014;348:g2419
- [2] Privacy and confidentiality Law Handbook, Victoria
- [3] General Medical Council. Confidentiality. 2009.

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