

Proposed health law raises privacy concerns

BY MICHELLE LANG, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 21, 2009

A privacy group says proposed legislation could allow the province's top doctor to release Albertans' personal medical information to foreign governments--the second time a health bill has been at the centre of confidentiality concerns in recent months.

An organization that represents freedom of information officers and analysts says that proposed amendments to Alberta's Public Health Act could also compel schools to disclose students' medical information.

The Canadian Association of Professional Access and Privacy Administrators said parents and students have no way to opt out of the requirement, or even learn whether their medical information has been disclosed.

The association said it's also concerned about an amendment that would allow the province's chief medical officer to release personal information to the government of a foreign country.

"It's opening a back door all Albertans' medical information (being) distributed to we don't know who--foreign governments and their agencies," said Sharon Polsky, the association's national chairwoman.

The proposed legislation, introduced in the legislature on Feb. 11, is intended to expand the role of the chief medical officer of health, according to a government statement.

The provincial Health Department also says Bill 7 allows school boards to disclose student information to the chief medical officer to inform parents about programs such as immunization.

Howard May, a spokesman with Alberta Health, said the government welcomes input on the bill.

"If any group has concerns about any legislation, they need to contact us," said May. "Send us a letter, pick up the phone."

Alberta's privacy commissioner has not yet reviewed the proposed amendments, but officials at his office will likely do so next week.

Bill 7 is the second time in recent weeks that privacy concerns have been raised around proposed health legislation.

Earlier this month, the Alberta Medical Association said changes to the province's health information act would make it impossible for patients to control whether their medical information is included in Alberta's electronic health record.

The association argued some information could be life-saving in an emergency, while other details are intimate and should be kept off the provincewide system.

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