

Your family's health

By David R. Zimmerman

**A patient's protection against prying eyes....
New Pill warning for women 30 and over, etc.**

IMPERILED PRIVACY. The use of computers to keep health records is making confidential information about all of us far too accessible. Information is leaking from computerized files to the police, to insurance companies and to government agencies that pay for health care. Some of this information—on abortions, for example, or treatment of VD, alcoholism, addiction and mental illness—can be very damaging to a person, says a new U.S. Commerce Department study. Alarming, the report finds that much personal data in the computer banks is inaccurate. Yet few people are aware of these dossiers—and procedures to allow them to inspect and correct their records are almost nonexistent.

Eliminating health data banks appears impractical. More and more doctors and hospitals are using them—and finding them useful—in providing health care. The banks already are necessary for processing medical bills and insurance claims, and for catching insurance cheats—doctors and patients who raise the cost of everyone's medical care. Thus, data banks must be made more secure and must be run with greater concern for personal privacy. What can each of us do?

Political scientist Alan F. Westin, Ph.D., of Columbia University, says: resist—and, if possible, refuse to sign—releases that would open your personal health records to outsiders. When you buy insurance, seek work or apply for a license, he explains, you may be asked to sign a form authorizing the release of *all* your health records. Say that you will not sign, Westin suggests, unless the authorization is narrowed to stipulate the release of only those records that specifically relate to the insurance you wish to buy, or the employment or license you seek. The beauty parlor license board, for example, need not know you've had an abortion.

When asked to sign a release, Westin adds, use the opportunity to demand to see the medical or hospital records to which you are granting access. "If you don't know what's in your record, how can you give informed consent to its release? No one should sign a release unless he or she has had an opportunity to know what's in the medical file!"

DOUBLE JEOPARDY. The federal government has warned women over 40 not to use the Pill because it appears to enhance greatly their risk of death from heart disease. Now an analyst at the non-profit Population Council in New York has re-analyzed the data upon which this warning is based. He finds that the added risk for the most part is due not to the Pill alone, but to a combination of the Pill and cigarette smoking. A woman aged 40-44 who does not smoke, and who does not use the Pill, has only seven chances in 100,000 of dying of heart disease, says sociologist Anrudh Jain, Ph.D. But, he says, her risk is 12 times greater—about 83 chances of dying per 100,000 women—if she uses the Pill and smokes heavily (more than 15 cigarettes per day). The combined risk is *much* higher than the risk of either the Pill or smoking alone—for unknown reasons. Between age 30 and 40, the risk is less severe.

OOPS! The name of the inventor of a new poison ivy treatment was inadvertently misspelled in the April *Journal*. It is David P. Borris, Ph.D., of the University of Mississippi.

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