

Fear of Computer Misuse

Washington

A government report warned yesterday that computerized medical records are vulnerable to misuse by those who have no right to see them.

In state after state, the report found that health-care agencies moved to safeguard the confidential rights of patients only where civil liberties groups have gone to court.

The 382-page report was written by Alan F. Westin of Columbia University based upon an investigation sponsored by the Commerce Department's National Bureau of Standards.

In New York, Westin's report found that, for more than three years, the state Department of Mental Hygiene required that detailed personal information on patients at state mental institutions be punched into a statewide computer system.

Each person's computer record would include such items as suicidal thoughts, sexual problems, anti-social behavior and drug use.

The patients' records would be available, with some controls, to doctors, courts, missing persons' agencies, police and Medicare and Medicaid administrators all over New York state, the report said.

After a lengthy court battle, New York state won the right to retain its centralized records system. It remains in use.

In Missouri, the state attempted to require all public and private hospitals to provide detailed information on hospital discharges. That information was to be fed into a computer so state health officials could "study the prevalence and control of disease in Missouri."

After similar questions were raised about the program's legality, it was made voluntary.

Similar attempts to gather centralized medical information on individuals have been made in several states including Michigan,

Washington and California. The report noted heightened public sensitivity to computer abuse since the Watergate scandals exposed misuse of Internal Revenue Service records and wiretapping and bugging.

Westin singled out the aborted attempt by White House employees to burglarize the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist in search of medical records that could be used against him.

Westin's researchers visited six major health-care agencies including the Los Angeles County Medical Center. There, they said, they found widespread potential for abuse of medical records.

For example, anyone knowing how to use one of 100 computer terminals could obtain detailed information of the medical problems of patients in nine different Los Angeles hospitals.

Despite the report's warnings about computer abuse, it found that most actual violations of patients' rights had occurred where

doctors, nurses or health administrators failed to adequately store and disseminate old-fashioned printed records.

Nonetheless, the investigators said the potential for computer abuse grows worse daily. "Most computerized health data systems are being created or expanded without sufficient consultation in advance with groups representing citizens' rights and doctor-patient interest, and without some kind of proceeding open to the general public," the report said.

Only medical files with the most sensitive psychiatric information should be withheld from patients, it said.

Beyond that, whenever insurance companies, law enforcement agencies or any institution seeks medical information, the patient should be informed of his or her rights and given control of its dissemination, the report said.

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