



OFFICE OF THE
INFORMATION &
PRIVACY COMMISSIONER
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News Release

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Health ministry must improve personal privacy controls in wake of breaches

VICTORIA — B.C. Privacy Commissioner Elizabeth Denham is recommending changes to the Ministry of Health's privacy practices in the wake of three privacy breaches affecting millions of British Columbians.

In an investigation report released today, the Commissioner assessed the ministry's response to the privacy breaches, as well as the ministry's overall data-handling practices in relation to health research.

"The Ministry of Health collects a wide range and volume of health data, which is invaluable to researchers seeking new solutions for patients and improved health outcomes for citizens. The public supports this research, but expects their data to be managed securely," said Denham.

The investigation revealed serious deficiencies in the ministry's privacy practices at the time the breaches occurred. The lack of operational and technical safeguards led to a situation in which ministry employees were able to copy a large volume of personal health data onto unencrypted flash drives and share that data with other parties, undetected.

The investigation found that at the time the breaches happened, the ministry did not have reasonable security in place to protect personal information as required by section 30 of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*. However, the ministry's response to the data breaches, once discovered, did comply with section 30 of FIPPA.

The Commissioner has made 11 recommendations to improve the ministry's privacy practices. The Commissioner's office will be in regular contact with the ministry until the recommendations have been addressed.

"The recommendations I have made in this report are essential to both facilitate access to information for health research and to address the privacy and data security compliance issues identified in this investigation. Privacy and research are allies, not adversaries, in the pursuit of better health outcomes," said Denham.

To coincide with the report, the Commissioner also has published a new guidance document, *Accountable Privacy Management in B.C.'s Public Sector*, which provides a blueprint and step-by-step instructions for public bodies to develop comprehensive privacy programs and protect citizens' personal information.

"This guidance outlines what we expect to see from public bodies in their data protection practices, and we will be using this document in our future investigations and audits."

Investigation Report F13-02: Ministry of Health and the new guidance document, *Accountable Privacy Management for B.C.'s Public Sector*, are available at:
www.oipc.bc.ca

The Commissioner will be available for one-on-one interviews between 10 a.m. and 12:15 p.m. To arrange an interview, please contact:

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