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B.C. needs new health information law to improve patient care, protect privacy

VICTORIA—The Government of British Columbia should enact a new health information privacy law that allows patients to reap the benefits of health innovation while also protecting privacy, says B.C. Information and Privacy Commissioner Elizabeth Denham.

The recommendation is one of 21 made by the Commissioner in a special report released today that outlines the changing landscape of health-care in the wake of new technologies and cutting-edge research.

“In the coming years, we are poised to see a whole-scale transformation of the health-care sector. Digital health, whole genome sequencing and big data linkages present new opportunities for innovation, but they also present new risks for the protection of personal health information.

“While other jurisdictions in Canada have stand-alone health information legislation, in B.C. we have a patchwork of laws where the rules can be complex and difficult to follow. This patchwork does not provide sufficient clarity, transparency and controls for the public, who may have questions about how their personal health information is being used, shared, and protected.

“Doctors treat the patient, not the disease; likewise, government needs to take a holistic approach to the collection, use, disclosure and protection of personal health information and patient data by introducing a comprehensive health information privacy law with independent oversight and enforcement,” said Denham.

The report also contains important recommendations to enhance the ability of researchers to safely and securely access data. Some of the proposals include streamlining approvals to promote efficient access to data for researchers, and making the process more transparent for the public.

“B.C. has an opportunity to be a leader, to embrace these new technologies and use them to improve health outcomes for patients and promote leading edge research. To achieve this aim, we need the right legal framework with robust privacy protections that meets the evolving needs of patients and the public,” said Denham.

A Prescription for Legislative Reform: Improving Privacy Protection in BC's Health Sector is available at: www.oipc.bc.ca/report/special-reports

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