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Media Advisory

Who's Looking Through Your Medicine Cabinet? CHEO Researcher Looks at Use and Disclosure of Prescription Data

OTTAWA - Canadians spend millions of dollars on prescription drugs each year. Prescription in hand, we normally head to our local drugstore and trust that our prescription will be filled accurately and meet our medical needs. Rarely do we question where our medical information is sent once that prescription has been filled. The answer might surprise you. If you live outside of British Columbia, this information is often sold to commercial data brokers who analyze the data and then sell the resulting prescription pattern data to pharmaceutical companies. Much of this is for the purpose of market research.

In a recent series of articles titled "***Privacy Interests in Prescription Data***", Dr. Khaled El Emam, Canada Research Chair in Electronic Health Information, raises concerns about the ethical policy and privacy implications of the use and disclosure of prescription data. This data includes drug details and the identity of the prescribing physician. While there may be concerns about the extent to which targeted marketing to physicians can influence their prescribing habits, attempts to restrict the sale of prescription data based on prescriber privacy arguments have largely failed. There is also little evidence supporting the argument that patients can be re-identified in those retail pharmacy prescription records.

Hospital pharmacy data, however, are a different matter because they contain more personal and sensitive details about patients. In those circumstances the prescription records must be properly anonymized before they are provided to outside companies and researchers for analysis.

As electronic health records are implemented more broadly, more personal health information will be readily available for research and commercial uses. Dr. El Emam's articles illustrate just how easily one can re-identify patients if the data is not properly anonymized.

About Dr. Khaled El Emam: *Dr. El Emam, Associate Professor, Faculty of Medicine and the School of Information Technology and Engineering, University of Ottawa, is a senior scientist and Principal Investigator at the [Electronic Health Information laboratory](#) at the CHEO Research Institute. He is available for interviews.*

About the CHEO Research Institute: *Established in 1984, the CHEO Research Institute coordinates the research activities of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario*

(CHEO) and is one of the institutes associated with the University of Ottawa Teaching Hospitals. The Research Institute brings together health professionals from within CHEO to share their efforts in solving paediatric health problems. It also promotes collaborative research outside the hospital with partners from the immediate community, industry and the international scientific world.

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To set up an interview with Dr. El Emam, please contact CHEO Public Relations at 613-737-2343.

Links to articles:

- P. Kosseim and K. El Emam: "Privacy interests in prescription data. Part 1: Prescriber privacy." IEEE Security and Privacy, 7(1):72-76, January/February, 2009.
<http://download.ehealthinformation.ca/etc/prescriptionrecords-1.pdf>
- K. El Emam and P. Kosseim: "Privacy interests in prescription data. Part 2: Patient privacy." IEEE Security and Privacy, 7(2):75-78, March/April, 2009.
<http://download.ehealthinformation.ca/etc/prescriptionrecords-2.pdf>