

News release

July 8, 2009

Commissioner urges vigilance in wake of computer virus outbreak at Alberta Health Services

The Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner has been notified by Alberta Health Services that a virus was present on the Alberta Health Services network in Edmonton. The virus impacted the network and Netcare, Alberta's electronic health record, before it was discovered and removed.

The virus is a new variant of a Trojan horse program called coreflood and is designed to steal data from an infected computer and send it to a server controlled by a hacker. Coreflood captures passwords and data the user of the computer accesses. The virus was active from May 15 to 29 before it was detected and removed.

AHS identified two groups who are potentially at risk. Patients whose health information was accessed in Netcare through an infected computer and employees who accessed personal banking and email accounts from work using an infected computer. AHS is sending letters to the 11,582 patients whose information may have been exposed and has notified all affected employees.

Commissioner Frank Work says this does not necessarily mean Netcare itself has been infected by the virus; rather the virus may have captured patient data accessed through Netcare from an infected computer and sent it to an external party. "While it appears the risk to patients is low, viruses don't discriminate and this is an important message to everyone about the need to run up to date anti virus software", says the Commissioner.

The Commissioner's office is investigating. In the meantime Work is expecting a full forensic report from Alberta Health Services on how this happened and what steps will be taken to prevent future breaches. Work says "AHS responded quickly when the virus was detected and that steps have been taken to notify users and patients with advice on what they should do to protect personal and health information".

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