



MEDIA RELEASE

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BC Government Fast-Tracks Costly E-Health System: Unprepared and Unequipped to Safeguard Privacy

Vancouver, BC: Despite posing a serious threat to every British Columbian's constitutional right to privacy, the BC Government plans to roll-out its new "eHealth" system of integrated electronic healthcare records. Today, a group of organizations concerned about medical privacy and patients' rights launched BC's Big Opt Out campaign to educate British Columbians about the dangers of eHealth. The campaign urges citizens to actively protect their health privacy and guard against eHealth's undermining the fundamental right to patient confidentiality. The website for BC's Big Opt Out (www.bcoptout.ca) offers denial-of-consent letters that citizens can download and personalize to help ensure the continued confidentiality of personal health information.

"While technology offers all kinds of benefits to healthcare, the centralization of electronic health information poses a massive threat to patient privacy and data security with little or no evidence of the promised benefits to quality of care and cost-savings," said Micheal Vonn, campaign organizer and Policy Director of the BC Civil Liberties Association. "Centralizing the health information of millions of citizens is a formula for disaster that has already been seen in those jurisdictions that have these systems. Governments assure citizens that the system will be secure and encryption will be of the highest level, but the global history of the security of large central databases of this kind is frankly terrible, and the costs almost invariably spiral out of control. As Ross Anderson, Professor of Security Engineering at Cambridge said about these systems: they cost billions of dollars, usually don't work, and place citizens' privacy and safety at risk when they do."

eHealth would function as a widely-accessible electronic database. Patients' records are uploaded from healthcare providers (doctors, pharmacists, testing labs) to a centralized system containing the health records of all citizens. The project is part of a national strategy costing over \$5 billion to date. Future costs will continue to be significant as BC's healthcare providers and health authorities need to upgrade their various data systems to accommodate the eHealth system.

"The inevitable hypothetical that is always used to try to justify eHealth is the patient who arrives unconscious in emergency with no medical alert bracelet to warn of an allergy to certain medications. A very tiny amount of centralized health information would assist in these rare scenarios. But that's not what eHealth is; eHealth is a giant longitudinal database of a wide array of details of your health history. That is, information that is completely useless to the emergency room doctor, but very interesting to employers, insurers, researchers, abusive spouses, police, etc. We are hurtling towards a system in which health care providers will no longer be able to



safeguard our information, including the most sensitive of our medical histories: sexual health, mental health, addictions, family violence, genetic predispositions to diseases, etc. We cannot have a healthcare system that people are afraid to access because they know that their information is not confidential.”

BC’s legislation for eHealth contains a provision for patients to have some limited ability to direct who is able to see their health information on the centralized system. BC’s Big Opt Out is concerned that these provisions will be too weak to protect privacy, especially in light of the Province’s admitted goal to integrate eHealth into a vast electronic data-sharing system with numerous other ministries and their private sector contractors. Vonn: “Vague assurances are not enough; citizens need to be confident about their medical privacy and that needs to be demonstrated before the system goes live.”

Similar systems have been developed and have met with consistent failure. Many Canadian privacy commissioners, alarmed by eHealth systems proceeding without sufficient privacy protection and security, have been decrying the rush to implement without clear and accurate information to the public. Last week, the Opposition in Ontario called for the Auditor General to audit the Ontario eHealth system for its perceived failure to generate anything of value for its \$647 million investment. And recently Britain’s much maligned, grotesquely expensive and widely opposed national version of eHealth was infiltrated by a hacker who used it to leak Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s personal health information to the media. BC’s Big Opt Out follows the design of Britain’s original Big Opt Out campaign against the British eHealth system.

BC’s Big Opt Out campaign’s ‘nerve-centre’ is its website, www.bcoptout.ca. The website has comprehensive information and resources explaining eHealth and a series of Opt Out letters tailored to the different healthcare providers who will be required to participate in eHealth. The website also features a letter to MLAs which demands the BC Government ensure that eHealth offers the following:

- The right of every British Columbian to determine for themselves whether or not to participate in eHealth by giving or withholding informed consent.
- The right of every British Columbian who decides to consent to participate in eHealth to determine the degree of their participation.
- The implementation of a substantial and widespread information campaign to inform all British Columbians about eHealth, their rights and how to exercise those rights.

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