

## **GUIDELINE: Emailing personal health information**

The Personal Health Information Act (PHIA) requires that trustees implement procedures to prevent the interception of the information by unauthorized persons where they intend to disclose personal health information (PHI) electronically (e.g. email).

As a rule, email is not considered a secure method of disclosing PHI and should not be relied upon where more secure methods of communication are available; however, if you reasonably believe that emailing the information is the only available method of communication or the only way to send the information, the following is adhered to::

### **Before Emailing:**

1. Take into account whether a more secure method of communication, such as telephone conversation or fax, for example, may be a reasonable option.
2. Ensure sending the PHI to the minimum number of people who need to know the information.
3. Confirm the correct name/email address of the intended recipient(s). Use caution with auto-populated recipient email addresses.
4. Exclude identifiable information in the subject line of the email.
5. Where possible, include PHI in an attachment. Where PHI is being sent in the body of an email, only disclose the minimum amount of information required by the recipient and ensure that all personal identifiers are removed (e.g. Mr. Alan Smith could be Mr. S or AS)
6. When sending an email to a client, limit identifying program specific details where it may reveal specific information about the health of the individual.
7. If reasonable encrypt and always password protect attachments containing PHI. Passwords should be communicated by phone or, when that is not a reasonable option, at minimum, in a separate message.
8. Double-check recipient address(es) in the "To" fields before you send the email.
9. Include Subject line: CONFIDENTIAL EMAIL for the use of the individual to which it is addressed.
10. Before using e-mail to communicate with patients or clients, you must send a test message to confirm their email address and including the following language:

*"Shared Health [or RHA/SDO (and site/facility if applicable)] cares about your privacy.  
\*Shared Health has policies and procedures in place that require that any information shared by you electronically will be treated and managed in accordance with our obligations under The Personal Health Information Act.*



*It is important to note, however, that there is always risk when using electronic communications. Email is not considered secure and \*Shared Health is not responsible for the security of your email service, your own device (for example, your smartphone or tablet) or the internet connection that you are using.*

*Our staff are required to guard your personal health information and use it only as legislation allows. That will remain the case with any personal health information our staff receive from you.*

*Before we can start any electronic communication with you about your health, we need you to acknowledge the risk, including the risk to your personal health information, that is described above. By choosing to communicate with your health care provider by electronic methods, you acknowledge and agree that:*

*there remains risks associated with this method of communication and waive any and all liability of \*Shared Health, its affiliates, and the health professionals involved for any damages or claims arising out of or in connection with your electronic communication even if Shared Health, its affiliates, and the health professionals have been advised of the possibility of such liabilities and*

*emails to your health care provider should not be time sensitive or used in cases of medical emergency or crisis. In the case of a medical emergency or crisis, call 911. Urgent messages or needs should be relayed to your health care provider using regular telephone communication.*

*Electronic communication is not a substitute for care normally provided during a scheduled appointment. Appointments should be made to discuss any new issues, sensitive matters or where clinical advice is being sought.*

*Emails received may not be responded to by your health care provider and any follow up may be conducted by telephone or scheduling an appointment.*

*Please contact your health care provider if you have any concerns or questions or if you are not comfortable with the risks described here. Your health care provider can support you in finding another way to connect to support your health needs”.*

11. If, despite the above-mentioned measures, a message is sent to the wrong email or person, steps should be taken immediately to try and mitigate the breach. Steps may include trying to recall the message and where that is not successful, reaching out to the recipient to ensure that the message is ‘triple’ deleted, including from their trash folder and deleted items recovery

#### **Email best practice:**

- **NEVER** e-mail identifiable health information to a health care provider’s personal e-mail account. (E. g. Yahoo, Google, iCloud)
- **NEVER** forward your work email to a personal email account (E.g. Yahoo, Google, iCloud).
- **NEVER** Use e-mail distribution/group lists, carbon copy (cc) or blind carbon copy (bcc)



when sending information/communication to clients.

- Where possible, confirm delivery of the email with a delivery receipt or follow-up phone call.
- Where possible or it is recommended to not respond to email threads containing PHI where that information is not necessary to be sent repeatedly. Instead delete the thread or start a new message.
- If you have any question, you can talk with the site Privacy Officer.

**When personal health information is mistakenly emailed to the wrong site or person (recipient) you MUST notify your supervisor, manager or site Privacy Officer immediately to report the breach!**

#### **RESOURCES:**

- Covid-19 Guideline for using email - <https://sharedhealthmb.ca/files/covid-19-privacy-security.pdf>
- Relevant PHIA and HIS policies links  
The Shared Health 310.140.115 - Confidentiality of Personal Health Information policy can be found here: [https://policies.sharedhealthmb.ca/wp-admin/admin-ajax.php?juwpfisadmin=false&action=wpfd&task=file.download&wpfd\\_category\\_id=29&wpfd\\_file\\_id=887&token=a998e558efb41ce9153fb603b4a9f171&preview=1](https://policies.sharedhealthmb.ca/wp-admin/admin-ajax.php?juwpfisadmin=false&action=wpfd&task=file.download&wpfd_category_id=29&wpfd_file_id=887&token=a998e558efb41ce9153fb603b4a9f171&preview=1)