

Court threat over data

By Robin Stride

Consultants or GPs with a private practice could become a test case in the courts if they resist Data Protection Act registration.

Until now, they have widely escaped individual attention from the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) while the spotlight has been on other professions.

But the low number of doctors on its list has set alarm bells ringing and if independent practitioners' registrations fail to improve satisfactorily after *Independent Practitioner Today's* publicity this month, then the ICO's 'softly softly' approach is set to harden.

In March, the ICO, which regards the £35 a year registration fee as 'nominal', successfully prosecuted a law firm in Hounslow, Middlesex, for offences under the Data Protection Act.

A solicitor was fined £100 and ordered to pay costs, a total of £832.05. He was a sole practitioner and then ceased practising as a solicitor.

The ICO said its prosecution followed the lawyer's failure to notify as a data controller. He had maintained that the firm was exempt from notifying under the Data Protection Act despite clear advice from the ICO, but he was convicted following a trial.

Assistant Information Commissioner Mick Gorrill said at the time: 'It is disappointing that we continue to see solicitors, professionals charged with dispensing legal advice, ignoring their obligations under the Data Protection Act.'

But he said this case showed that the ICO stood ready to take organisations to court for failing to notify.

Mr Gorrill warned: 'We will not hesitate to test cases through the courts if we believe organisations have incorrectly failed to notify under the Act. Organisations must take their data protection responsibilities seriously.'

DATA OBLIGATIONS

Anyone who processes personal information must comply with eight principles, which make sure that personal information is:

- Fairly and lawfully processed
- Processed for limited purposes
- Adequate, relevant and not excessive
- Accurate and up to date
- Not kept longer than necessary
- Processed in line with your rights
- Secure
- Not transferred to other countries without adequate protection

Conference on developing your practice

'Establishing and developing your private practice' is the title of a one-day conference being run by PPM Software Ltd at BMA House, Tavistock Square, London, on Saturday 14 November.

Director Tom Hunt said: 'We have brought together

a group of very knowledgeable speakers who will cover all aspects of a private practice. It is envisaged this conference will be the first of many.'

For details on how to attend, phone 01737 554427 or email julie@ppmssoftware.com.

NHS Gamma Knife centre thanks to HCA tie-up

The London Gamma Knife Centre, part of a joint £3m venture between HCA, Barts and The London Hospital, has opened this month.

It is hoped thousands of patients with different types of brain tumours will benefit from treatment at the centre, the first of its kind at an NHS hospital in London.

Until now, the Gamma Knife treatment has only been available for NHS patients through private clinics and hospitals in London. Now these patients can undergo their entire treatment at a single location at The London Gamma Knife Centre at Barts.

Consultant neurosurgeon Mr Ian Sabin said: 'NHS patients used to have their frame-fitting and MRI scan at the Royal London, but then had to go to the HCA's clinic in Harley Street for the Gamma Knife treatment. Now they can have everything under the same roof, which makes it a lot easier for both patients and staff.'

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Electronic billing surge

Electronic billing is to be made available to doctor users of DGL Solutions' practice management software following an agreement with Healthcode, the UK's primary electronic bills clearer for the private health market.

DGL Solutions client Desné Marston, practice manager at Harley Street ENT Clinic, is excited about the benefits electronic billing will now bring to the practice.

She said: 'The process of submitting invoices and receiving payments can take up to eight weeks normally, but obviously with the recent Royal Mail strikes, this could be longer. Sending electronic invoices direct to the insurers will be much more efficient.'

Mrs Marston added: 'What's more, some insurers not already doing so will start paying us by BACS, which will help improve our cash flow even further.'

Healthcode director Peter Connor said he believed the collaboration of the companies – both market leaders in software solutions for the private health market – would trigger a move to electronic billing by the overwhelming majority of medical consultants.

He told *Independent Practitioner Today*: 'We are committed to helping more practices improve their business processes through electronic billing technology and are consequently delighted to collaborate with DGL Solutions.'

DGL Solutions managing director Peter Gregory said: 'We are pleased to be working with Healthcode again to offer consultants the opportunity to send their bills direct to insurers.'

'This represents a significant improvement in the level of service we are able to offer.'



Desné Marston, practice manager, says tie-up will speed up payments