



## Guidelines for E-mail Use

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## Introduction

Electronic mail (e-mail) is a means of sending messages between computers using electronic networks and includes sending and receiving messages through the use of organizational internal e-mail systems, as well as sending and receiving messages across the internet. It is an integral part of conducting business, effectively replacing a large number of telephone calls, memos and letters.

With the daily use of e-mail throughout the organization and society at large, individuals transmit more and more information electronically without the use of paper documents. This requires the use of effective information management practices in the creation, use and management of e-mail communication, including the identification and retention of e-mails which are official organizational records.

The purpose of these guidelines is to identify the requirements for the responsible management and appropriate use of e-mail by employees and affiliated individuals of Central Health.

## E-Mail as a Business Tool

E-mail is an essential communication and business tool within Central Health. Electronic records such as e-mail, generated through Central Health's computer system and/or wireless mobile devices may be considered an organizational record, and as such are governed by legislation such as the *Management of Information Act*, the *Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, and are subject to legal processes such as inquiry, disclosure, discovery, subpoena and auditing. Therefore, caution must be taken in the content and management of all e-mail communication.

*The Management of Information Act defines a government record as any record "...created by or received by a public body in the conduct of its affairs..."*

E-mail communications are organizational records when they are created or received in connection with the business transactions of Central Health and are subject to information management policies and procedures of Central Health.

Not all e-mail communications are considered organizational records. Personal, administrative messages such as meeting dates and times or information existing in another record may be considered transitory in nature.

*The Management of Information Act defines a transitory record as a record of "...temporary usefulness in any format or medium having no ongoing value beyond an immediate and minor transaction or the preparation of a subsequent record..."*

Where transitory e-mails are retained, they are still discoverable as evidence of business activity of Central Health, and in the event of an access request may be disclosed regardless of the content, according to legislative requirements.

## **E-mail as a Clinical Tool**

Central Health's e-mail communication systems are primarily a business tool and are not intended for clinical use. E-mail communication must not contain identifiable client specific information.

Clinical documentation systems within Central Health such as Meditech and Client Referral Management System (CRMS) are intended for the sole purpose to capture and record client care and services received. Therefore, documentation of personal health information is required in these systems.

Where client specific information is generated outside of Central Health through e-mail communication by an individual external to or from clients of Central Health, care must be taken to preserve and protect the information.

Electronic client specific communication must not be isolated from the clinical record. When an individual receives client specific information through e-mail communication, the information must be printed and retained as a part of the client's original record. It is imperative to ensure that all individuals involved in the client's circle of care have appropriate access to the client specific information, and all healthcare professionals/providers including managers document in the client's record, with e-mail communication related to a client kept to a minimum.

Client specific information received through e-mail communication must not be edited nor cut and pasted into Central Health's clinical documentation systems. The integrity of the e-mail communication must be protected and include information regarding the sender, receiver, date and the full content of the communication. Once the e-mail communication becomes an official part of the client's record, it is to be deleted and purged from the recipient's e-mail account.

## **Privacy of E-mail Communication**

Individuals must seriously consider privacy and confidentiality when choosing e-mail as a form of communication.

Choosing e-mail to communicate information about a client, third party or an individual's own personal information considerably increases the likelihood of unauthorized disclosure. E-mail communication could be intercepted in transit or be viewed by an unauthorized individual. It is important for an individual to remember that e-mail communication can be forwarded to another individual(s) without their knowledge or consent, or even accidentally sent to an unintended recipient.

## **Security of E-mail Communication**

E-mail should not be considered to be secure once sent, as the sender has no control over whom the recipient chooses to share the e-mail with and this type of sharing of information may increase just because of the relative ease of sharing information electronically.

By the very nature of the Internet, once an e-mail message leaves Central Health's network, there is no control over the systems it passes through while en-route to the intended recipient.

Central Health's e-mail communication may occur within an approved internal e-mail system such as Meditech MOX and Microsoft Outlook. Information transferred outside of Central Health's secure network such as accounts like gmail, hotmail, sympatico, etc. are not considered a secure method of communication. Individuals are required to use Central Health's approved internal e-mail systems to communicate Central Health's business information.

Central Health does not support the use of password protected processes to communicate client specific or identifiable information of an individual through the use of e-mail and does not currently have enabled security features with the ability to digitally sign and/or encrypt e-mail communication and attachments. Without such protection, information transmitted electronically can be easily compromised. The security of information contained in an e-mail communication cannot be ensured and caution must be taken in the management of all e-mail communication. Therefore, personal information and personal health information must not be included in any e-mail communication. No identifiable information is to be included in any form of e-mail communication concerning a client or employee.

Individuals using e-mail as a means of communication should always assume there is a possibility that the communication may be read by someone other than the intended recipient.

Any information transmitted through e-mail communication and classified as confidential information, must be treated in the same secure manner as any other confidential information in any form, received or created within Central Health.

## **Disclosure of E-mail Communication**

E-mails are subject to the same access and privacy laws as any other organizational record.

The *Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act* promotes accountability and transparency in the public body sector by allowing individuals the right to access organizational held records. With specific limited exceptions, the public can request access to e-mail communication available through Central Health's electronic messaging systems.

Any e-mail communication is a form of disclosure of information and is subject to Central Health's information management privacy and security policies and documentation practices. Safeguards appropriate to the degree of sensitivity of the information must be applied to all e-mail communication.

Some e-mail communications may contain content which may be embarrassing if disclosed in error or in responding to an access request. For example:

- the e-mail may lack the formality of other records on the same subject;
- the writing style, grammar and presentation may not be very polished;
- the e-mail may be more conversational, perhaps more candid or less neutral in tone than would be the case in other forms of communication; or
- the e-mail may have personal content of non-work-related matters.

When using e-mail as a form of communication, individuals should:

- ensure that the correct e-mail address of the recipient(s) is used, and is typed correctly;
- define your audience for each e-mail communication. Avoid using the "reply to all" feature unless appropriate/necessary;
- verify that a distribution list is up-to-date and that the recipients for a particular message are authorized to receive the message before sending it to the entire list;
- consider using a list/group name rather than individual names, or sending blind copies to individuals on a list, if the message discloses sensitive information;
- obtain the author's permission before forwarding his or her e-mail message to other individuals, to a discussion group, or posting it on an electronic bulletin board;
- use the subject line appropriately;
- avoid generating e-mail threads where possible as they may create duplication and compound the quantity of information for disclosure;
- do not use e-mail systems for collecting, using and disclosing identifiable personal information or personal health information;
- delete e-mail messages of a personal or transitory nature from e-mail systems on a regular and timely basis;
- ensure that the information documented in e-mails is factual and avoid opinions regarding a specific identified issue or individual;
- retain e-mails in an organized manner that makes them accessible to those authorized to view the content;
- protect all organizational e-mail communication from unauthorized disclosure to third parties and from inadvertent loss or destruction;

- protect personal information, personal health information and confidential business information of Central Health in accordance to applicable legislative requirements and Central Health's policies and procedures;
- use caution when selecting color print in e-mails. Where e-mails have to be reproduced, ink colors causes issues where copying and reproduction is required;
- use caution in the use of backgrounds. Background images or watermarks in e-mails can clutter the screen and makes it difficult for individuals to read or distinguish the text from the background.
- create, use, communicate and retain e-mail messages according to these guidelines.

### **Integrity and Authenticity of Email Communication**

Electronic records such as e-mail must provide the same level of professionalism and accountability as any paper record or other forms of communication.

Care and caution must be taken to ensure the authorship and integrity of any e-mail communication at all times.

Individuals should:

- avoid editing e-mail content of another sender; individuals should take care to maintain the completeness and the intended message of the sender;
- sign all e-mail communication to indicate authorship. E-mail communication must include the sender's full name and credentials, as well as a standard privacy statement;
- where e-mail information is sent or received, information that identifies the origin and destination of the information and the date and time when it was sent and received must also be retained along with the full content of the e-mail; and
- keep all login names and passwords confidential.

***Remember anything you write can be reproduced and be available for public view. Your electronic communications are considered organizational records when they are created or received in connection with the business transactions and activities of Central Health. Individuals should write and manage e-mail communication with the same professional standards and practices that apply to all other paper records.***

## DEFINITIONS

**Authenticity**

Verifies that a record has not been modified or corrupted following creation, receipt, migration or conversion.

**Business Information**

Information with respect to Central Health's business activity that is not publicly available in any form. Employees / affiliates may come in contact with such information that is not generally known to the public as they perform their duties. Examples include:

- legal matters involving the organization that are not public knowledge,
- financial information that is not available in Central Health's annual report,
- contractual agreements with vendors, consultants, contractors, and third parties (The confidentiality of this information may be written into the contract, e.g. non-disclosure of the cost of the service),
- information about intellectual property such as development of new technology and treatments or unpublished reports,
- information pertaining to Central Health's information technology access and security systems.

**Confidentiality**

An obligation to keep an individual's personal health information private, ensuring that only those authorized have access to the information.

**Disclose**

To make the information available or to release it but does not include a use of the information and "disclosure" has a corresponding meaning.

**E-mail**

Electronic messages, including attachments sent and received electronically between personal computers or terminals linked by communication facilities. This includes address information (to, from, cc, bc, subject and date) and the message content.

**Encryption**

The operation by which plain text is modified with an intelligible, non-exploitable text making it non-



retrievable except by authorized users that have the key to bring it back to its original format.

**Integrity**

Demonstrates that the record is complete and has been unaltered.

**Personal Health Information**

Identifying information in oral or recorded form about an individual that relates to:

- information concerning the physical or mental health of the individual, including information respecting the individual's health care status and history and the health history of the individual's family;
- the provision of health care to the individual, including information respecting the person providing the health care;
- the donation by an individual of a body part or any bodily substance, including information derived from the testing or examination of a body part or bodily substance;
- registration information;
- payments or eligibility for a health care program or service in respect of the individual, including eligibility for coverage under an insurance or payment arrangement with respect to health care;
- an individual's entitlement to benefits under or participation in a health care program or service;
- information about the individual that is collected in the course of, and is incidental to, the provision of a health care program or service or payment for a health care program or service;
- a drug as defined in the *Pharmacy Act*, a health care aid, device, product, equipment or other item provided to an individual under a prescription or other authorization issued by a health care professional; or
- the identity of a person's representative as defined in Section 7 of the *Personal Health Information Act*.

**Personal Information**

Recorded information about an identifiable individual including:

- the individual's name, address, or telephone number;

- the individual's race, national or ethnic origin, color, or religious or political beliefs or associations;
- the individual's age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status or family status;
- an identifying number, symbol or other particular assigned to the individual;
- the individual's fingerprints, blood type or inheritable characteristics;
- information about the individual's health care status or history, including a physical or mental disability;
- information about the individual's educational, financial, criminal, or employment status or history;
- the opinions of a person about the individual; and
- the individual's personal views or opinions.

**Record**

Information in any form, and includes information that is written, photographed, recorded or stored in any manner, but does not include a computer program or a mechanism that produced records on any storage medium.

**Privacy**

The right of an individual to control the collection, use and disclosure of information about themselves.

**Security**

Technological, administrative and physical safeguards to ensure protection and integrity of confidential information.

**Transitory Record**

Government record of temporary usefulness in any format or medium having no ongoing value beyond an immediate and minor transaction or the preparation of a subsequent record.

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