

Press Release

Omnimedix Institute Supports Health Privacy Project's New "Best Practices Guidelines for Employers Offering Personal Health Records (PHRs)"

Voluntary Nature of Guidelines Necessitates Independent Verification of Compliance and PHR Operational Control to Gain Employee Trust of Employer-Sponsored PHRs

PORTLAND, Oregon - December 20, 2007

Omnimedix Institute, a 501(c)(3) non-profit health information technology and development organization based in Portland, announces its support for the Health Privacy Project's "Best Practices Guidelines for Employers Offering Personal Health Records (PHRs)," published today and available at <http://www.healthprivacy.org>.

Omnimedix Institute applauds the pathbreaking and consensus building work of the Health Privacy Project in creating guidelines for employer-sponsored PHRs. As a participant in the process leading to the formulation of the Guidelines, Omnimedix is pleased to note the inclusion of several principles critical to mitigating the enormous mistrust associated with employer-sponsored PHRs. Paramount among these principles are:

1. Employee control of all information included in a PHR;
2. Employee authorization of all parties granted access to any information in a PHR;
3. An explicit provision against an employer's access to an employee's PHR or any of its underlying data.

"With employers under ever increasing economic pressure to identify high cost, chronically ill, and low productivity employees, the temptation to violate these principles is significant," said J.D. Kleinke, Chairman and C.E.O. of Omnimedix. "This temptation is amplified by employers' financial sponsorship of, and frequent operational involvement in, the implementation of PHRs and PHR data-gathering infrastructures for their employees."

Omnimedix Institute notes that all provisions of the Guidelines are voluntary, including those related to "enforcement and remedies" for violations by corporate sponsors of PHRs. The potential for a disconnect between the aspirations of these voluntary Guidelines and their execution in real-world settings is a matter of serious concern for those who recognize that mistrust is a key cultural obstacle to the long overdue adoption of information technologies in the U.S. health care

system. Omnimedix Institute agrees with the Guidelines' statement that "employers should establish oversight and accountability mechanisms for adhering to their PHR policies and practices." But will all employers do so? How will employees know when adherence fails to live up to these voluntary policies and practices?

Adopting legal and regulatory processes to implement these Guidelines may be the surest way to enforce them, punish corporate violations, and safeguard the privacy and security of employees' medical information, but the creation of such processes will be time-consuming, costly and controversial. In the meanwhile, Omnimedix believes the quickest and most efficient way to enforce the Guidelines is through the use of independent accounting and auditing organizations to monitor compliance and identify deviations. Utilizing groups beholden to the public trust, not to the corporate sponsors of PHRs, is the fastest and surest way to ensure that these important health information technologies are not misused by corporations seeking to cloak intrusive employee health cost containment strategies with high-minded rhetoric about employee empowerment or health system reform.

"The use of an independent public watchdog process would do much to address this widespread lack of trust, well in advance of any government regulation," Kleinke said. "Without meaningful oversight, sugar-coated public relations statements about corporate-sponsored PHRs and mere promises of good corporate behavior will not be sufficient for employees to trust their employers with their sensitive personal health information."

For further information about this press release, contact info@omnimedix.org.

About Omnimedix

Omnimedix Institute is a 501(c)(3) non-profit charitable organization incorporated in the State of Oregon in 2004. Omnimedix is dedicated to improving the quality, efficiency and equity of health care in the U.S. by fostering the proliferation and use of patient-centric health information technologies. For more information, go to www.omnimedix.org.