

Communications via fax

The Medical Council's Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Medical Practitioners, 9th Edition, 2024 (available on the Medical Council website) provides clear guidelines in relation to maintaining patient confidentiality and this should always be observed when communicating with patients. A doctor should protect a patient's privacy and ensure that patient information in their control is protected against improper disclosure, access or loss.

Fax Messages

The transmission of personal health information to a patient by fax should be avoided where possible. GPs are encouraged to use Healthlink and Healthmail, secure clinical email, to transfer confidential patient identifiable clinical information.

In circumstances where medical information is required urgently and a more secure means of communication is unavailable the following should be taken into consideration when communicating by fax:

1. Make sure that the patient information is being sent to the correct fax number. If an auto-dial function is being used, check that the number has not been changed.
2. The recipient should be notified by phone that the fax will arrive shortly.
3. Request that the recipient confirms by phone that the faxed document has been received.
4. Fax machines which are used to transmit and receive confidential information should be kept in a secure area and not accessible to the general public.
5. Make sure a fax cover sheet is included which clearly identifies the sender and the intended recipient.
6. The fax cover sheet should indicate that the information contained therein is private and confidential.
7. Confirm the correct number of pages were sent and received.
8. Check the confirmation sheet to ensure there were no errors.
9. Keep the fax confirmation sheet together with the faxed material on file.

Sample confidentiality notice

A fax cover sheet which clearly identifies the sender and the intended recipient should be used. The fax cover sheet should also indicate that the information is confidential.

Possible wording for a fax sheet is as follows:

CONFIDENTIALITY NOTICE:

The information contained in this facsimile message is privileged and confidential information intended for the use of the individual or entity named above. If you have received this fax in error, please contact us immediately and then destroy the faxed material.

Please do not hesitate to contact Medisec if you have any specific queries regarding faxes.

"The contents of this publication are indicative of current developments and contain guidance on general medico legal queries. It does not constitute and should not be relied upon as definitive legal, clinical or other advice and if you have any specific queries, please contact Medisec for advice".