

Storage and Retention of Medical Records

The Medisec team frequently receives queries regarding storage and retention of medical records, particularly from members who hold records for those patients who have completed treatment with the consultants, who are moving premises or upgrading systems. This is a short overview of your ethical obligations and the appropriate retention periods for different categories of records.

Storage of Medical Records

The Medical Council's *Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Medical Practitioners, 9th Edition, 2024* (available on the Medical Council website) states

25.4 You should protect your patients' privacy and you must ensure that patient information in your control is protected against improper disclosure, access or loss.

38.3 You must comply with data protection and any other legislation and regulations relating to maintenance, storage, disposal and access to records.

Patient information may include all confidential records including handwritten notes, computer generated records, test results, copies of correspondence, photographic, video or audio recordings etc. In relation to recordings of a patient made by a doctor, the Medical Council's Guide provides:

31.1 Making audio, video or photographic recordings of a patient on your personal or work devices may be necessary for safe patient care. You must take particular care in relation to the storage and sharing of recordings of a patient.

It is best practice to avoid carrying clinical records in a car, for example, when doing home visits. Any laptop or remote devices with access to patient records should be fully secure and encrypted.

Administrative staff should be aware of their confidentiality obligations, for example locking paper records away in a suitable filing cabinet and ensuring security of computer systems. Technology is not fool-proof and regular back-up should be ensured.

Retention of Medical Records

In compliance with the Data Protection Acts, "Personal data must be kept in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the personal data are processed".

The Medical Council's Guide deals with retention of medical records at paragraph 39 and provides:

39.1 The length of time for which you keep patient records should take account of medical professional requirements to retain records (to support continuity of care, transfer of care and potentially for medicolegal purposes) and data protection principles.

39.2 You must keep medical records for as long as required by law or for as long as they remain clinically relevant.

39.3 If you have ownership and responsibility for records and receive a request to delete or destroy patient records under data protection principles, you should first consider whether there is a professional and/or medico-legal requirement to retain them. If in doubt about the appropriate time periods and whether deletion of records is appropriate, you should obtain advice from your medical indemnifier, employer or legal adviser.

The retention periods for medical records are taken from the HSE 'Record retention periods (2013)'. These periods are also in line with the recommendations of Medical Indemnity Agencies and the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA). The HSE has also published a Code of Practice for Healthcare Records Management, referenced in the Medical Council's Guide, which includes a suggested schedule for retention of different categories of healthcare record.

Please see the table below.

Type of Patient Record	Retention Period
Adult/General	8 years after last contact.
Deceased patients	8 years after date of death.
Children and young people	Retain until the patient's 25 th birthday or 26 th if young person was 17 at the conclusion of treatment, or eight years after death. If the illness or death had potential relevance to adult conditions or genetic implications, specific advice should be sought as to whether to retain the records for a longer period.
Maternity (all obstetric and midwifery records, including those of episodes of maternity care that end in stillbirth or where the child later dies)	25 years after the birth of the last child.
Mentally disordered persons (within the meaning of the Mental Health Acts 1945 to 2001)	20 years after the date of last contact between the patient and the doctor, or eight years after the death of the patient if sooner.
Patients included in clinical trials	20 years.
Suicide - notes of patients having died by suicide	10 years.
Cause of Death Certificate Counterfoils	2 years.
Records/documents related to any litigation	National Hospital Office recommends that the records are reviewed 10 years after the file is closed. Note however, if the litigation related to a child, this should not be used to lessen the retention period set out above.

As noted in the HSE guidance, "however desirable it is to keep in original format, every single record forever, the reality is, that there is limited storage capacity available and perpetual retention of all records will be in breach of the Data Protection Acts". The best interests of the patient should always be borne in mind and data should not be deleted or retained unnecessarily.

It is appropriate to securely dispose of obsolete medical records but doctors should decide carefully what records should be retained and what records may safely be destroyed.

Records belonging to current patients must be kept. If storage arrangements for paper files might pose a risk to the security or integrity of the records, they should be scanned carefully and saved electronically so that the hard copies can be securely destroyed.

Register of records destroyed after retention period

Healthcare records which have reached their official retention period, should be reviewed under the criteria issued by the HSE to check if they should be destroyed. If records are to be disposed of, it is vital to do this in a way which maintains the confidentiality of the records. According to the HSE guidance, a register of records destroyed should be maintained as proof that the record no longer exists.

The register should show:

- name of the file
- former location of file
- date of destruction
- who gave the authority to destroy the records

For healthcare records, the register of records destroyed should also include:

- healthcare record number
- surname
- first name
- address
- date of birth

Adhering to the above best practice should assist in preventing or defending any complaints relating to the storage and retention of patient records. If you have any queries in relation to the above, please do not hesitate to contact a member of the Medisec advisory team.

“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”.