



Every MD will soon have unique “cradle-to-grave” identifying number

Steven Wharry

Canadian doctors will soon be given a unique identifier number that will follow them to the grave. Each Medical Identification Number for Canada (MINC) will contain 1 letter and 8 numerals, and will remain the same throughout a physician's career. It will never be reused.

The goal is to provide a common ID thread that will supplant the hodgepodge of various physician identifiers that already exist at the provincial and national level.

The driving force behind the new system is the Federation of Medical Licensing Authorities of Canada (FMLAC), the body linking the country's medical colleges and other licensing bodies. The idea is to create an “information thread” that will provide more accurate data on the physician workforce, from time of entry to medical school until retirement.

The new numbers raise the same privacy and confidentiality issues as Canada's ubiquitous social insurance numbers. John Swiniarski, assistant registrar at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, says the FMLAC is “very aware” of the need to balance the quest for reliable information with the protection of personal information.

“We want to have a nationally recognized system with every jurisdiction comfortable with the way MINCs are issued and used,” said Swiniarski, who is managing the project for the FMLAC. “If that means building in some more rules, then fine.”

Since the new number is designed to be the “hub” of a wheel that includes existing information collected by other organizations, many of the privacy issues have been

addressed already. “This is simply a collection of numbers that verifies the identity of an individual as unique, and as such privacy concerns are minimal,” said Dr. Gary Johnson, the FMLAC's executive director.

The federation is following the Canadian Standards Association Model Code for the Protection of Personal Information and has sent a detailed description of the project to provincial privacy commissioners.

“The goal is to have everyone in Canada feeling comfortable about the system,” said Swiniarski. “As the comments from the privacy commissioners come back we will be seeing how we can accommodate them. The bottom line is that if we can't address all concerns and questions this won't be accepted as the national standard.”

Johnson said the idea for the all-encompassing number arose during a 1996 meeting of the Canadian Medical Forum, where the need for a simplified tracking was discussed. Several organizations — the CMA, the Association of Canadian Medical Colleges, the Medical Council of Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information — already have national systems of unique identifiers, but it is difficult or impossible to link information from these databases. The pea soup gets even thicker when physician billing numbers, member numbers and/or registration numbers are added to the mix. Johnson says the MINC will limit confusion and increase the reliability of identification systems.

The new numbers will be given to every physician or student at the time of first (even temporary) entry to any aspect of Canadian medicine. The list includes medical school applicants, undergraduate students, postgraduate trainees and physicians of any registration status. Fields of information within the new identification system include current name, name as it appears on the medical degree or another undergraduate degree awarded prior to entry to medical school, date of birth, country of birth and sex.

“There is a need to be able to identify all individuals within the medical system, but that must be balanced with the need to protect the privacy of the individual,” said Swiniarski.

Steven Wharry is a CMAJ assistant editor.

What will it look like?

The typical MINC identifier will look like this: M12-345-679. The new system will allow the use of up to 10 million identifying numbers. The letter “M” identifies it as a MINC number and designates “medical.” The next 7 numerals create a serial number that contains no encoded information. The last numeral is a check digit that guards against transposition errors.