

# Medical Records Exposed

An unwelcome letter has come in the mail. It begins this way:

“Dear Mary:

We are writing to inform you of an incident at Welby Medical that may have resulted in the disclosure of your personal information, including your name and limited protected health information.”

I’ve changed the name of the medical practice to “Welby Medical” to protect my privacy, although apparently it is a little late for that. The rest, though, is exactly what the letter says.

Note the letter’s salutation: “Dear Mary.” Addressing me by first name, as if the letter were coming from a pal away on vacation, gives the impression that Welby Medical and I are friends.

We're not. Friends don't charge you money when you say, "Ahh." (We're not enemies, either. I hold no grudge over Welby Medical's exposure of my limited protected health information, although I do hope that "limited" means that my height was exposed but my weight was kept hidden.)

I suspect that, by using my first name, Welby Medical is trying to soften me up for the bad news that is coming. We're all friends here, Mary! Keep that in mind as you read this letter!

Can you imagine if I addressed the doctors at Welby Medical by their first names? If I called them "Sue" and "Dave" instead of "Dr. Smith" and "Dr. Jones"? I don't think that would be well received at all.

(Disclaimer: The names in the preceding sentence are invented for illustrative purposes. To my knowledge, there is no Dr. Smith or Dr. Jones at Welby Medical. I don't know of any Sue or Dave, either. If there are doctors with those names at Welby, they are not my doctors, I am not referring to them, and the whole thing is a big misunderstanding. And let's not forget who started all this trouble by allowing my data to leak.)

There is only one doctor that I know of who had no problem having his patients address him by first name: Marcus Welby, M.D. In a series of weird coincidences, virtually every patient of Dr. Welby's was also his friend. What are the chances? Quite high, in Dr. Welby's case.

In fact, so warm were these friendships between doctor and patient that the patient invariably used the doctor's nickname. They did not call him Marcus, which was much too formal. Instead they called him "Mark." How bad is it, Mark? How long have I got, Mark? What do you mean that there was an incident at Welby Medical that may have resulted in the disclosure of my personal information, Mark?

Actually, no patient of Dr. Welby's ever had to worry about the accidental disclosure of personal information. That's because the good doctor kept his friends'—um, I mean his patients'—medical records in a locked file cabinet in his office. Each patient's test results and handwritten records were placed in a manila folder, and then arranged alphabetically in the file cabinet. Aside from Dr. Welby himself, only two individuals ever had access to those records: Dr. Steven Kiley—Dr. Welby's partner in the medical practice—and Consuelo Lopez, the practice's nurse / office manager.

That's it. No interlopers. No hackers. No data breaches. Which is the great advantage of not putting medical records on computer. Of course, *Marcus Welby, M.D.* is fiction. Old fiction, too: the television show ran from 1969 to 1976. These days, computerized medical records are here to stay, and they certainly have their advantages. Still, there is something to be said for locked file cabinets.

The letter from Welby Medical concludes this way: "We want you to know that we are taking steps

*Mary Langton*

to stop a similar event from occurring in the future. This includes making modifications to interfaces to secure all information, implementing additional safeguards to secure our documents, and providing additional training about the proper way to secure our information systems.”

Glad to hear it. Now stop addressing me by first name. Who do you think I am, Mark Welby?