



Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Health**

Guidelines for the Transmission of Personal Health Information by Fax Machine

1. Introduction

The widespread use of fax machines internal and external to the WA health system, often to transmit personal health information, has raised concerns regarding the security of the transmissions. While the benefits of faxing are well recognised, the potential for compromise to the integrity and confidentiality of personal health information is also evident. Errors in transmission, miss-dialled numbers and the unknown location of a receiver's fax machine are just some of the inherent problems associated with faxing.

As a guiding rule fax machines are only be used when:

- no other secure and sufficiently rapid transmission method is available between a source and destination
- reasonable and appropriate measures are undertaken to ensure confidentiality is maintained
- fax machines are used appropriately for their location.

The following guidelines are intended to assist the WA health system in the use of fax machines to transfer personal health information.

2. Guidelines

2.1 Location of fax machines

Fax machines are to be in secure areas such as the health record department, designated client care areas or where the recipient is located. Access to fax machines need to be restricted to authorised employees.

Employees need to be assured that the receiving fax machine is in a secure area protected from unauthorised access or the authorised employee is standing by the fax machine to receive the personal health information.

2.2 When to use fax machines

The decision to fax personal health information needs to be weighed up against the:

- nature of the occasion
 - where there is a clear operational requirement for prompt transmission of the information and no other appropriate secure transmission method is available
- content of the information being sent
 - only the necessary information pertaining to the request should be released with appropriate consent
- well-being of the patient if the information came to the attention of an unauthorised person
 - the highest level of vigilance is needed to ensure that only the intended recipient receives the information.

2.3 Fax cover sheet

The fax cover sheet requires attachment to the document(s) being transmitted and to be filed in the correspondence section of the patient's health record.

The transmission report is to be attached to the cover sheet as verification that the fax was sent to the correct number and the correct number of pages were sent.

All personal health information is to appear after the cover sheet.

The minimum requirements for the cover sheet are as follows:

- sending institution details
 - name and address
- sender details
 - name
 - signature
 - department
 - telephone number
 - fax number
- requesting individual or organisation details
 - name
 - address
 - department
 - telephone number
 - fax number
- date and time of transmission
- type of information being sent
- total number of pages sent, including the cover sheet
- the word '**CONFIDENTIAL**' noted prominently
- statement regarding disclosure of information
- instructions for the recipient to verify receipt of the document
- instructions if the document is received in error.

2.4 Sending of faxes

This section applies to faxes that are sent via a manually operated fax machine.

Authorisation to send personal health information by fax is obtained from the appropriated officers with enough authority within the health care facility. These officers may be designated within local policy and procedure manuals.

All officers authorised to send personal health information by fax machine are familiar with operating a fax machine and relevant understanding of policies and procedures for handling personal health information.

Any reservation as to the authenticity of the person requesting information requires the sender to verify before any personal health information is released.

Original documents from the patient record are photocopied and stamped as 'Copy' on the photocopy. Photocopies of letters from outside doctors, other hospitals or institutions cannot be forwarded without the consent of the original doctor or institution. Documents that are marked 'Not for copy without the consent of the author' are to be observed.

Where the receiving fax is not located in a secure area, the sender is to telephone the recipient before beginning the transmission to ensure an authorised person is available to receive the document.

The fax number is to be verified by the sender before sending the document. On most fax machines, the fax number can be confirmed by checking the visual display before pressing 'start'.

Fax machines with pre-set dialling features are preferable as they assist in eliminating the possibility of incorrect dialling. Pre-set numbers are to be independently reviewed and verified as correct for each recipient on a six-month basis as a minimum.

A log book of all fax transmissions is to be maintained next to the fax machine. The types of information collected are date, time, fax number, recipient/destination and name and signature of the person sending the fax. To remind people to use the log book, place signage above the fax machine.

A paper copy of the information requested is to be sent by mail at the same time as the fax is transmitted when requested by the recipient. Recipients may request a paper copy where it is important to verify the integrity of the information.

After transmission, faxes are to be removed from the tray immediately to ensure they are not mixed with any other correspondence.

As an added measure, contact the recipient by telephone or ask to contact the sender, via instruction on the cover sheet, to confirm all faxed documents have been received.

Fax copies are to be destroyed using approved methods for confidential patient health information.

If a fax has been misdirected, the person or organisation receiving the information is to be contacted immediately and asked to return documents in a sealed envelope marked 'Confidential' via courier for secure destruction. An [Information Breach Notification Form](#) is to be completed as per the [Information Breach Policy](#).

2.5 Receiving Faxes

Only authorised officers are permitted to receive a fax or to clear the tray of incoming faxes for distribution to the recipient specified on the cover sheet. Fax machines are to be checked regularly by the authorised officers.

The authorised officer is to:

- contact the recipient when the fax arrives, and the fax is to be sealed in an envelope and set aside for collection
- Check the number of pages against the number written on the cover sheet
- Record the incoming fax in the log book
- Telephone the sender to confirm that the fax has been received if requested
- If fax is sent in error, contact the sender to advise and receive instructions to deal with the fax.

3. Thermal paper faxes

Thermal paper used by some fax machines quickly deteriorates and is not suitable for long term retention within a patient's health record.

Documents received via fax on thermal or non-bond paper is to be photocopied onto bond paper as soon as possible. The photocopy should be kept in place of the fax or until the original arrives by mail/courier.

The thermal fax copy can be destroyed using approved methods for patient health information.

4. Automated faxes

Electronic information systems that generate faxes and send them automatically, provide functionality that delivers a comparable level of information, security and confidentiality to manual fax machines.

Automated fax numbers require verification by an independent employee on a six month basis as a minimum.

Applications that automate faxing are required to:

- securely verify the sender. Within WA health system the HE number is sufficient
- generate a cover sheet as outlined in [section 2.3](#)
- provide feedback to the sender as to the outcome of the fax
- store an electronic copy of the fax transmitted to the recipient
- be capable of printing paper copies of the fax when required.

Appendix 1

Insert the health care facilities name, logo, department name and contact details.

To: *Insert authorised recipients name, department, Facility and address.*

Fax Number: *Recipient's fax number*

Phone Number: *Recipient's phone number*

From: *Insert authorised sender's name and department.*

Fax Number: *Sender's fax number*

Message:

Instruction to Authorised Receiver:

Please complete the information below and return it to the sender via the fax number above to verify receipt of this fax.

I _____ verify I have received a/an _____ page document by fax from _____.

Signature of receiver: _____

Important – The contents of this facsimile are confidential and may be protected by professional privilege. The contents are intended only for the named recipient of this facsimile. If the reader of this facsimile is not the intended recipient, you are hereby notified that any use, reproduction, disclosure or distribution of the information contained in this facsimile is prohibited. If you have received this message in error, please notify us immediately and return the original.

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