



News Report Activity: Case 6

Case 6: *'As patients are wrongly branded drunks, heavy smokers and Alzheimer's victims... Are doctors writing lies in your medical notes to line their pockets?'* (Daily Mail: 2014).

As patients are wrongly branded drunks, heavy smokers and Alzheimer's victims... Are doctors writing lies in your medical notes to line their pockets?

- **If GPs meet targets for monitoring conditions they get extra funds**
- **Mary Kerswell was handcuffed and taken away by police when she demanded to see her notes**
- **Helen Wilkinson discovered she had been labelled an alcoholic**

By ZOE BRENNAN FOR THE DAILY MAIL

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Normally mild-mannered and calm, Mary Kerswell found herself becoming unusually angry with the receptionist at her doctor's surgery.

For the 67-year-old grandmother and retired biomedical scientist had been asked by her GP to take a urine test to monitor a kidney condition she did not have.

Bewildered, she asked to have a copy of her medical notes, for which she paid £10. She was told to come back a week later to collect them.

She did, yet when she arrived at the practice last December to find the notes were still not ready, Mary refused to leave without them and staged a sit-down protest in the waiting room.

Astonishingly, the surgery called the police and Mary was taken away in handcuffs.

When Mary did get hold of her notes later that month, the apparent reason for the doctor's reluctance to release them quickly was clear — they were littered with errors.

As well as being wrongly recorded as having chronic kidney disease, the healthy pensioner was said to be a heavy smoker who suffered from Alzheimer's.

The record also claimed incorrectly that she had undergone a hysterectomy and a double hip replacement. 'I was utterly shocked,' says Mary. 'It read like a post-mortem, it really did. They must have been the entries for someone else.'

'It could have been really dangerous. Who knows what implications these errors could have had if I'd been taken to hospital in an emergency?'

Mary's doctor said the mistakes were caused by a 'filing error'.

But, alarmingly, there are concerns that errors on medical notes are not always accidental.





Indeed, there are fears that some GPs are fabricating medical records to reap financial rewards. If GPs meet targets for monitoring conditions such as asthma and diabetes, they get extra funds — but for these to be made available, naturally some of their patients need to have the conditions in question.

The organisation Patients Know Best found that one third of medical records contained errors. And Joyce Robins, a spokeswoman for the health service users' group Patient Concern, highlights several cases.



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Organisation Patients Know Best found that one third of medical records contained errors

One man went to see his doctor suffering from stress because he was being stalked by a woman, who was later convicted of the offence.

Some years later, he found that his notes said he was suffering from 'paranoid delusions' that he had a stalker. Ms Robins says: 'This gentleman has been labelled a fruitcake for ever. He has been unable to get it removed from his records.'

He should be able to get an annotation on his notes at least, but he can't. It is an extraordinary state of affairs.' Another woman, struggling with bloating and lethargy, was called a 'maligner' in her notes.

The wheat allergy found to have caused her 'fusspot' symptoms was diagnosed only when her records were lost. Another man found that his records erroneously stated he suffered from heart disease. When he told his GP that this was incorrect, the doctor answered: 'Can you prove it?'

In fact the patient happened to be chief executive of one of London's major hospitals, so he was more than able to correct his GP. But others are not so lucky.

'It could have been really dangerous. Who knows what implications these errors could have had if I'd been taken to hospital in an emergency?'

Recent cases also abound on the internet. On a parenting blog, one mother writes: 'My doctor casually mentioned my son's epilepsy during a consultation last year. My son does not have epilepsy.'





Another woman glanced at her doctor's screen and was 'gobsmacked' to see 'elephantiasis' — which is caused by tropical parasites — listed as a current condition.

'My legs are a bit chunky but I doubt they would qualify for this ailment,' she says. 'Clearly there has been a mistake, but am unsure about challenging the doctors.'

Fears about the consequences of challenging GPs about their notes are not unfounded. In Mary's case, she has been struck off the patient list by her local health centre, having been labelled a 'problem patient'.

Ms Robins insists that this is not an uncommon occurrence. 'It's so difficult,' she says. 'People say: "I daren't ask for my notes because I'll be struck off." We can't tell them that this won't happen because it does.' Patient Concern wants to see an end to 'cradle-to-grave' notes that patients cannot correct.

'If something is wrong it is round your neck for ever,' says Ms Robins. 'It is estimated that 40 per cent of doctors' notes are inaccurate. These errors could be life-threatening. Yet doctors just don't like to admit they are wrong.'

She wants easier access to notes and a system whereby errors can be corrected — especially as the national computerisation of medical notes, which has been taking place over the past few years, has led to further mistakes creeping in as records are transferred from paper to computer.

Theoretically, patients have the right to see their medical records under the Data Protection Act 1998. The request can be refused only if it would cause serious harm to the patient's mental health. However, some doctors are still against patients having access to their notes, arguing that it restricts what they feel able to write.

Even if patients do manage to see their notes, they can face a struggle to have inaccuracies corrected.



Helen Wilkinson campaigns against the NHS Care Records System after she noticed on her records that she had been labelled an alcoholic





She was able to amend her records after a two-year battle, during which her MP raised her case in Parliament. Helen, 47, now campaigns for The Big Opt Out, a group that opposes the NHS Care Records System — the vast computer network which was introduced in 2010 and holds information electronically.

But this has left her vulnerable. 'I can't access NHS care, just because I don't want my data stored in this way,' she says. 'I have been removed from NHS databases and don't even have an NHS number.'

'I'm only able to access treatment when I'm ill because medical colleagues treat me as a favour. Nine years later, I still can't access care.'

The case of Jo Walsh, a 40-year-old PR consultant, is equally disturbing. She went to see the nurse for a routine matter and saw her notes over the nurse's shoulder.

Astonished, she realised that a doctor had made false and unpleasant references to her mental health after she complained that he had cut one of her appointments short. Outraged, she asked to see a full copy of her records. Jo, who lives in London, had gone to see the doctor because she was suffering from extreme bruising, perhaps connected to a dietary deficiency.

She says: 'The references made in my notes were to depression, bipolar disorder, hypomania, drug abuse and psychosis. The doctor made me look like a nutter.'

'This was all inferred from a meeting that was so rushed I couldn't even explain all my symptoms, and that ended with him pretty much pushing me out of the door. I reckon it lasted around five minutes.'

'I was so upset afterwards that I went straight to reception and complained that the doctor had been really rude. But it was only later that I found out what he had written in my records.'

After Jo alerted the surgery to these errors, she was told that the notes were the result of a 'bad day for the doctor'. However, much to Jo's distress, any information on medical records cannot be removed from the system, only added to.

Dr Mohammad Al-Ubaydli, the founder of Patients Know Best, wants to see a new system where patients are in charge of their own notes and bring them to appointments.

The Patient Association explains: 'Medical records cannot usually be changed because they are supposed to show what was written at the relevant time. However, a note can be added to your records explaining why you think they are incorrect and giving the correct version of events.'

Jo is understandably concerned that these erroneous claims are now irrevocably on her record. She is considering legal action.

Dr Mohammad Al-Ubaydli, the founder of Patients Know Best, wants to see a new system where patients are in charge of their own notes and bring them to appointments.

'A doctor should ask a patient for his or her notes,' he says. 'Medical notes are full of errors. They continue to accumulate if patients never see their records. Some are going to be dangerous. It is the patient and their family who have the biggest interest in their records. The patient and doctor should help each other, rather than trying to cover up errors. Then we could avoid all this silliness.'

This would also stop GPs altering patients' notes to gain more funding from the Government. Dr Al-Ubaydli adds: 'If you look at U.S. research, we know that data gets shaped differently when there are financial concerns. Does that happen in the UK? Draw your own conclusions.'

Indeed, GPs in the UK earn around £1 billion a year from bonuses. About a quarter of their average income is linked to achieving government targets.

Whatever the reasons for these errors, they are deeply worrying and seem unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future, despite complaints from numerous patients.

As Ms Robins reflects: 'We have sat on Department of Health committees on this and nothing is done. After all, GPs are very powerful people.'

