



the columns

correspondence

Details update form and the Data Protection Act 1998

I have had some difficulties with completing this recent request from the College.

If I read the consent form that they have sent me correctly, it appears to ask for my permission for the College to publish 'in the reasonable opinion of the College' my personal details held by them. This is information offered by me for the purpose of maintaining my membership, which would henceforth be available to everyone with an Internet connection worldwide. In addition, it is to be made available for use in future unspecified research, statistical analysis, and for use in what are mysteriously termed 'related activities'.

All this is stated as being for furtherance of the 'College's objectives', and relates to any information that I have supplied or will supply (with the possible exception of my ethnicity or 'home contact details'), without limit of time. No reference is made to the benefits for members – and I am unable to identify any.

The College further state that as many people should agree to this as possible because . . .

' . . . we would then need to check, every time we make one of those 400 monthly updates, that your name in particular isn't there. If we can get agreement from *pretty much everybody* it will speed things up enormously.' (my italics).

This indicates that the College does not expect members to be able to keep up with the number of updates to the information made available as individuals. The College will be the only people who are fully aware of what they are putting out. This is a huge (and possibly expensive) risk area.

I am unhappy consenting for my information to be used for unspecified research at some time in the future. I am also unhappy that the College is requesting my consent for them to be sole arbiters of what references to me are to be made on their international and

up-to-date website. I have an active interest in information management and technology and some understanding of the inherent risks.

Essentially, I believe that the degree of consent being requested would be unenforceable in the event of litigation. I am concerned that the College may feel 'safer' having asked so many different consents with only one signature requested. I believe this may be an illusion of safety, and that individual members perhaps have not fully considered how much 'consent' is required.

The final paragraph of the consent form is punctuated with the graphic of an open padlock. Maybe there is still time?

C. S. Littlejohns Eastgate Team, West Cheshire Hospital, Liverpool Road, Chester CH2 1BQ

Reply from the College

The Data Protection Act 1998 has proven to be somewhat of a headache for us. It prevents us from posting personal information – even just a person's name – on the website without their written permission. Since we make 400 or so updates or uploads to the website each month, the bureaucracy involved in getting specific signed forms from every person mentioned in those pages was phenomenal, and was becoming a serious impediment to keeping the site going at all. The generic consent form is our way of trying to ensure that on the one hand we comply with the Act, and on the other we keep the site usable.

The wording and the approach have been approved by the College's solicitors.

It is our policy to keep personal data on the website to a minimum, regardless of what permissions we hold. Home addresses and details about ethnicity are specifically excluded, and will never be posted without a request from the person concerned. We would of course remove any details on request, if any member is unhappy with the use we make of the permission.

The benefit for members is straightforward: information can be placed on the website when it is needed, without several weeks' delay for permission requests to be sent out, reminders to be sent, text to be re-edited when we can't

get hold of people, and so on. The website staff can get on with developing the site, rather than spending most of their time bothering members for permissions, which in most cases seem trivial to the people concerned. By way of example, we are now able to generate committee lists for Faculties, Divisions, etc. directly from the College's database, and we have a routine to automatically filter out those people who haven't signed the generic consent.

The form offers a specific opt-out for use of the data in research, analysis and other uses, and members are welcome to make use of this opt-out if they wish. Our main concern is simply to be able to make the website work.

The system is now working well. We have received consent from 7700 members, and this has reduced the administrative overhead considerably. We would like to reduce it still further, and we would encourage any members who have not yet signed their form to do so. An FAQ giving further information is available at <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/dpa>.

Dave Jago Head of Publications, The Royal College of Psychiatrists

Flexibility is the key word

I have followed with interest the debate on the changing role of the consultant psychiatrist, and the difficulties in recruitment and retention. Over the past 6 months, there have been editorials, opinion articles, correspondence and a recent study by Mears *et al* (*Psychiatric Bulletin*, April 2004, **28**, 13–131) about different aspects of this debate. The Royal College, the British Medical Association and the General Medical Council are all debating how to reflect these pressures by changing consultant roles. I agree with Professor Appleby that flexibility is the key word (*Psychiatric Bulletin*, April 2004, **28**, 113).

As a specialist registrar, I have watched consultants and trusts struggle to provide safe, effective services within constrained budgets. Compared with a training post, a substantive post brings with it not just increased clinical work and responsibility, but also extra roles in management and