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DON'T MISS OUT ON YOUR MENINGITIS JAB

Or you may get meningitis. “Young teenagers, sixth formers and 'fresher' students going to university for the first time are now routinely offered a vaccination to prevent meningitis W disease”, says NHS Choices – adding that “The Men ACWY vaccine protects against four different causes of meningitis and septicaemia – meningococcal (Men) A, C, W and Y diseases.”

Sister Katrina Fennessy reminds us of the Urgent Catch-up programme for Meningitis ACWY. She says: “Adolescents born between 01/09/1996 to 31/08/1997 (School year 13) are eligible to receive the Meningitis ACWY vaccine. It is STRONGLY advised that those in this age group make an appointment to have this vaccine. ALSO those who are first time university entrants up to the age of 25 years of age are also eligible to receive this vaccine. So please make an appointment with your practice to have this administered.” Thanks Katrina – anyone interested in the jab can Google *NHS Choices Men ACWY vaccine* for more details. This is important – so, as they said in the old John Hurt ads, 'Don't die of ignorance.'

Incidentally trials of the new Men vaccine (which it was hoped would protect you against men) have proved disappointing. It seems they're not easily deterred!

INSURANCE COMPANIES

Love taking your money – but they're not quite so happy about giving any of it back. In the quest to find out everything there is to know about you (which presumably gives them more opportunity to push up your premiums or have an excuse not to pay out when you make a claim) they have been asking to see ALL your medical records when you apply for a policy for which they need only the details which are strictly relevant.

An article by Sophie Borland for the Daily Mail informs us that GPs “are increasingly giving insurers the entire confidential files on request, prompting fears that the details are being used to increase premiums. The Information Commissioner last night launched a crackdown on the practice, warning that it was against the law and potentially breached patients' privacy. It said that insurers have been increasingly exploiting a loophole to obtain patients' entire medical files from GPs, including any past conditions and their family history.”

Sophie B explains that the companies are "exploiting a tactic called a 'subject access right' ... which was designed to assist patients. It was not intended to help big business. The Information Commissioner usually wilts in the face of pressure from the NHS or big business ... but so far appears to be on the side of the patient when it comes to this abuse. The insurance companies will fight back, of course ... so it'll be interesting to see for how long the Information Commissioner holds his ground.

At the present time the IC's opinion is that the processing of a copy of an entire medical record by an insurance company is not relevant, is excessive, or is not necessary. So, while you wait to see how this plays out, the advice is (as ever) read the small print – don't sign to say you give your agreement to companies taking your complete medical record or you may find that's exactly what they do.

DETAILS OF GP APPOINTMENTS HANDED OVER

“A top health official has demanded confidential details of millions of GP appointments. Sparking yet another NHS privacy row, she has ordered the firm in charge of bookings at most English surgeries to hand over the sensitive data urgently.” This is an extract from a story by Gerri Peev and Jack Doyle in the Mail which signifies yet another assault on the tattered remains of the duty we supposedly have to keep your personal details confidential. Gerri and Jack go on to say: “The information includes the date, time and duration of appointments as well as the reason for the consultation. Most of the postcode of the patient is also asked for, as well as their date of birth, according to a letter seen by the Daily Mail.” This means that more than enough information is handed over for patients to be easily identified. So long confidentiality – it was nice knowing you!

SHOULD WE BE TAKING VITAMIN D SUPPLEMENTS?

The usual advice is that a healthy diet is all we need under most circumstances to obtain all the vitamins we need. Because of our gloomy weather, however, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN), an independent body of experts, has published draft recommendations on vitamin D which appear to stand this advice on its head.

The draft report highlights the importance of vitamin D in protecting musculoskeletal health. The experts also looked at possible links between vitamin D and non-musculoskeletal health outcomes including cancer, type 1 diabetes, multiple sclerosis and heart disease but found insufficient evidence to draw any firm conclusions. Ready for some figures? In order to protect musculoskeletal health in the UK population, SACN is recommending that blood concentration of 25(OH)D1 should not fall below 25nmol/L at any time of year. To avoid this, they're proposing a dietary intake of 10micrograms of vitamin D per day for every one aged above 1 year (and 8.5-10 micrograms/day for those under 1 year).

Current government advice is that at-risk groups should take a daily vitamin D supplement. These groups are pregnant and breastfeeding women, babies and children aged 6 months to five years, adults aged 65 and over, people who do not expose their skin to sunlight or are confined indoors for long periods of time and people who have darker skin such as people of African, Afro-Caribbean and South Asian origin. This advice will remain until the committee has considered any consultation responses and then submitted its final recommendations to government. My guess is that the 'at risk groups' will be extended – and many more people will end up taking supplements.

That's the medical advice ... and I'm reliably informed that the legal advice is that the committee's findings do not constitute an excuse for walking round the town in the nude whenever the sun shows itself.

TESCO TO HAVE ACCESS TO YOUR MEDICAL RECORDS

“High street pharmacies such as Boots, Tesco and Superdrug will be given access to NHS medical records, under a national scheme which privacy campaigners fear could expose patients to 'hard sell' tactics” writes Laura Donnelly in The Telegraph. She goes on to say: “Health officials have drawn up plans to send sensitive data from GP surgeries to pharmacies

across the country, starting this autumn, without considering the views of patients. NHS England says the scheme will ease pressures on family doctors, and improve the care given to patients in the High Street. But campaigners fear major commercial chains will be able to exploit the valuable data, and use it to push the sales of their products.”

The only barrier between your 'confidential' medical records and supermarkets such as Tesco is the GP ... but the NHS is getting heavy with anyone who dares question the wisdom of allowing so many people access to information contained in your 'notes.' I recently received a letter from a Mr Richard Jefferson of NHS England. It says that the CQC (which surely should be defending patients' rights, not attacking them) will put pressure on GPs who refuse to hand over patients 'summary care records' (the assumption being that this will happen even in those cases where the patients refuse their consent.) It adds that the GP contract states “GP practices are required to provide an automated upload of any changes to a patient's summary information at least once every working day to the Summary Care Record (SCR.)

The Tesco revelation is the latest in a series of worrying 'confidentiality lapses' by the NHS. Last November Ben Wilkinson wrote in the Mail: “NHS to carry on selling patients' medical data to insurance firms despite history of blunders over illegal use of the information. Data includes personal details of diagnoses, dates of birth and postcodes.” As for the new twist to the story, for all the denials it's not hard to see how Tesco and co could benefit from access to all this sensitive information. In the effort to regain it's lost glory, this could prove to be a marketing boon. As they say in the trade: “Every little helps!”

Dr John