

NHSCR “Letter Forwarding Service” Protocol

Introduction

1. This protocol describes how NHSCR data can be used to trace people who have lost contact with their families – without breaching patient confidentiality. The tracing procedure involves identifying the person being traced and alerting that person to the opportunity to re-establish contact with his/her family. If the person agrees, a letter from the family will be forwarded to him/her.

2. Directors of Public Health from all Scottish health boards have agreed to the reintroduction of a tracing service suspended in 1999 due to concerns about patient confidentiality. This protocol describes how confidentiality and security will be maintained. Its objectives are to define:

- the purpose of access to NHSCR database
- the way in which tracing cases will be handled
- the roles and responsibilities of those involved.

Tracing process

3. The tracing procedure will only be initiated by a request from a named charity to trace a person on behalf of a relative.

- The Missing Person’s Helpline
- The Red Cross
- The Salvation Army

The NHSCR will not accept requests:

- from adopted people who wish to trace their natural parents (or vice versa)
- from current or former partners looking for spouses
- from fathers who are not named on birth certificates
- from companies or any private law firm
- where contact could be disruptive.

4. Where a request is received to trace a number of relatives due to a genetic disorder, NHSCR will consult the Privacy Advisory Committee (an independently chaired body which advises the NHSCR on such ethical matters) and proceed only with the Committee’s approval. These cases are always handled by NHSCR management.

5. The following security measures will be taken in every case:

- requests will be handled by 2 specially-trained NHSCR staff, fully aware of the confidential nature of the work and the need to protect the anonymity of the person being sought
- the procedures will be monitored by NHSCR management

- the person will only be traced if the request for contact appears to be in the best interest of the person being sought
- details must be provided of who is seeking contact and their relationship to the person being sought
- letters to be forwarded will be vetted by NHSCR management to ensure the content appears to be in the interest of the person being sought; letters with potentially distressing or harmful statements will be returned to the enquirer stating the reason and the case will be closed
- letters from the family will only be forwarded with the written consent of the person being sought.

Action after tracing

6. Once NHSCR has traced the sought person, and no earlier than 20 days from the initial request (to allow enquirers time to change their mind), NHSCR will send an enquiry letter to the appropriate Practitioner Services Division (PSD) office. The PSD office is asked to add the person's address (which is not held on the NHSCR) and to check if the person's CHI record contains information which may suggest that contact would not be in his/her interests. If all is in order, the PSD will forward to the person, in a prepaid envelope supplied by NHSCR, a standard letter from NHSCR explaining the Letter Forwarding Service and a proforma requesting written consent for NHSCR to forward the family's letter.

7. On receipt of signed consent from the sought person, NHSCR will send the family's letter directly to an address of his/her choice and inform the originating charity. If written consent is not received within 3 months then the case will be closed and the person will not be contacted again. The family's letter will be returned to its owners through the originating charity.

8. Experience in England and Wales, where a similar service has been operated in a trouble-free way since 2000, suggests that these arrangements will ensure that the NHSCR Letter Forwarding Service will provide a valuable resource for the people of Scotland.

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Registrar General
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