Department of Veterans Affairs

Memorandum

Date JUL 1 0 2006

From Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health (10A)
Chief Research and Development Officer (12)

Subj Researcher Contacts with Veterans

To: VA Research Community

1. Contacting veterans enrolled in approved research is an essential activity for VA researchers, and there are well-recognized and tested mechanisms to ensure these contacts are conducted with appropriate attention to privacy and data security. As a result of a recent breach of data security and potential problems with identify theft, it is necessary to be even more sensitive when contacting veterans, especially to assure veterans that ORD contacts are not attempts at identity theft.

2. During the week of June 5, 2006, Secretary Nicholson sent a letter to all veterans to inform them about the loss of data and subsequent actions. In that letter, Secretary Nicholson warned veterans to beware of any phone calls, e-mails, and other communications from individuals claiming to be from VA or other official sources, asking for personal information or verification of it. This is referred to as information solicitation or "phishing." And veterans are often targets for such practices. The Secretary specifically advised veterans that VA, other government agencies, and other legitimate organizations will not contact veteran to ask for or to confirm personal information. Please note that the letter from Secretary Nicholson also indicated that veterans should report such an incident to VA at 1-800-FED-INFO (1-800-333-4636).

3. Veterans Health Administration personnel in field facilities have stopped all non-essential contacts of veterans to avoid any potential perception that contacts are attempts at identity theft. If it is determined that a contact is clinically essential and cannot be deferred, then the contact shall not solicit sensitive information (e.g., a patient's social security number).

4. Researchers must also restrict their telephone and other contacts with veterans to only those procedures and data elements outlined in Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved protocols. In these contacts, researchers must not request social security numbers.

5. During the recruitment process, researchers must make initial contacts with veterans in person and/or by letter prior to any telephone contact and provide a telephone number or other means that veterans can use to verify the validity of the study. One source of information about clinical trials that can be shared with veteran is http://www.clinicaltrials.gov/ where VA clinical trials are listed. Informed consent documents need to include information about where and how a veteran could verify the validity of a study and authorized contacts.

Researcher Contacts with Veterans

6. After recruitment and during the follow-up phase, a researcher should begin calls by referring to previous contacts and the information provided on the informed consent document.

7. We appreciate your commitment to our Nation's veterans and encourage you to be diligent in efforts to reassure veterans that VA is making every effort to protect them from identity theft.

Michael J. Kussman, MD, MS, MACP

Joel Kupersmith, MD