Managing Patient Complaints

This section will:

- Explain patients’ rights regarding complaints related to their privacy.
- Identify the requirements of an effective complaint management process.
- Describe the 10 steps of managing a complaint.

Under the BC Personal Information Protection Act (PIPA), physicians’ offices must have a complaint management process for individuals who have concerns about the office’s privacy practices. Having an accessible and effective complaint management process is an important aspect of managing privacy risks and helps to promote accountability, openness, and trust. It also allows an office to address complaints in a timely manner;¹ identify systemic or ongoing compliance issues, and demonstrate commitment to privacy.

When setting up a complaint management process, consider the following:

1. Decide who in the office will be responsible for receiving and managing complaints about the office’s compliance with PIPA. This could be the appointed Privacy Officer, or it could be delegated to another individual.
2. Develop and document a complaint procedure that is accessible, simple, and easy to use.
3. Consider developing a complaint form to assist in recording the complaint and to collect the necessary information required to investigate and respond.
4. Ensure that all staff are aware of the complaint management process so that they can direct the complainant to the appropriate person for follow-up, or in the absence of this individual, provide information to the complainant on how they may proceed with a complaint.
5. Remember that addressing a complaint quickly allows to maintain or even increase the patient’s trust in the practice.

Ten steps for managing a complaint:

1. When the complaint is received in writing, record the date of the complaint and acknowledge its receipt.

2. If the complaint is received verbally, record the nature of the complaint and the details.
3. If necessary, contact the individual to clarify the complaint.
4. Ensure that the complaint process is fair, impartial, and confidential.
5. Investigate the complaint by gathering information and fully understanding the circumstances. Clarify specifics of the complaint by asking questions such as:
   a. What do you believe occurred?
   b. What personal information is involved and what happened to it?
   c. When and where did the event(s) occur?
   d. Who was involved (e.g., staff, locum physicians, visiting specialists, physicians-in-training, third party contractual staff)?
6. Where a complaint is justified, determine the specific cause and take measures to remediate the situation. Communicate this to relevant staff involved. Record all decisions and actions taken to prevent recurrence.
7. If a complaint cannot be substantiated, document the investigation so it can be explained to the complainant.
8. Notify the complainant of the outcome regardless of whether the complaint can be substantiated or not. Where applicable, inform him or her of the steps taken to rectify the concerns.
9. Inform the complainant of the right to appeal to the Information and Privacy Commissioner for BC if he or she is not satisfied with the office’s response to the complaint.
10. If applicable, prevent recurrence through techniques such as modifying or updating policies and procedures, providing staff training, and implementing improved privacy and security safeguards.