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Americans Should Be Cautious About ‘Big Tech’ and Contact Tracing

COVID-19 is the Catalyst for Eliminating Privacy during the 21st Century ‘Gold rush’ of Medical Data

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Citizens’ Council for Health Freedom (CCHF) is warning Americans about the privacy dangers of contact tracing and letting them know why they might want to refuse to participate.

“At its core, contact tracing is the government collecting data on everyone’s friends, family, associates, and colleagues. This is some of the most intimate personal data we have,” said Twila Brase, president and co-founder of CCHF.

“Here’s how it works. If you or someone you know tests positive for the virus, a contact tracer will knock on your door or call your phone, entering unbidden into your life. They will ask you for the names of your friends, family, co-workers, and your relatives. They will contact those people and may ask or tell them to quarantine for 14 days. Even if they aren’t sure that person was exposed, or exposed long enough, the government may still impose quarantine,” she continued.

“Americans need to know they do not have to answer or respond to a contact tracer,” Brase said. “They have a right to refuse. But people also need to know that some state government agencies can charge you with a crime and forcibly quarantine you if you refuse.”

Already, many Americans nationwide are refusing to participate in contact tracing because they don’t want to share their information or they don’t trust public health officials with maintaining
their privacy. In Louisiana, citizens are refusing to answer their phones or provide the names of people they have been in contact with. As New York City gears up to ask hundreds of thousands of individuals to disclose personal information for their contact tracing efforts, thousands of New Yorkers indicated they will not participate because of privacy concerns.

“Government, health data industries, and ‘Big Tech’ make it sound so simple: give us your data and we’ll work together to end the pandemic. But they’re not talking about the loss of privacy, government databases or potential loss of personal freedom,” Brase stated.

“The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the recent advance of ‘Big Tech’ initiatives to grab the private health data of American patients,” said Brase.

For example, the Ascension healthcare system is legally sharing the medical records of 50 million Americans in 21 states with Google. Last year, the Mayo Clinic announced a 10-year partnership with the tech giant, which intends to use Google Cloud to secure and store every detail in a patient’s medical record. Microsoft has an agreement with Providence St. Joseph Health to enable data-driven clinical and operational decision-making, and established a 7-year partnership with Humana to improve AI and machine learning research. Cerner and Amazon have been working together to use patient data to evaluate “population health.”

Adding to these data endeavors, tech giants such as Apple and Google are now providing interfaces for third-party COVID-19 contact-tracing apps on Apple and Android smartphones.

All of this is permitted by the federal HIPAA “privacy” rule without the consent of Americans.

“HIPAA does not protect patient privacy,” Brase stated. “It’s a permissive data-sharing rule. For example, under its broad definition of ‘health care operations’ patient data can be shared with over 2.2 million third-party entities, plus government agencies, without patient consent.”

“There will be a day when COVID-19 is over. Americans must be careful about what they choose to share and what apps they choose to use in this temporary crisis because once they give their privacy rights away, they may never get them back,” Brase concluded.

CCHF maintains a patient-centered, privacy-focused, free-market perspective. CCHF has worked in its home state of Minnesota and at the national level for more than 20 years to protect health care choices, individualized patient care, and medical and genetic privacy rights. In 2016, CCHF launched The Wedge of Health Freedom, an online directory of direct-pay practices (JointheWedge.com).

Twila Brase, RN, PHN has been named by Modern Healthcare as one of the “100 Most Powerful People in Health Care.” She is the host of the daily Health Freedom Minute radio program heard by over 5 million weekly listeners on more than 800 radio stations nationwide, and the author of the eight-time award-winning book, Big Brother in the Exam Room: The Dangerous Truth About Electronic Health Records.

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