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Rise of Medical Identity Theft

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Medical identity theft has risen alongside technological developments, says Stateline.

In 2013, 43 percent of all data breaches in the United States involving personal information were breaches of medical records.

Not only does medical identity theft lead to financial consequences for victims, but often victims end up with incorrect medical information in their files as a result of the thief's use of their information. Medical identity theft is used to obtain medical services, devices, insurance reimbursements or drugs.

One of the concerns with the Affordable Care Act has been whether the health insurance exchanges could lead to privacy concerns. Moreover, the law has emphasized digitizing medical records as a way to cut costs and increase efficiency, but growing concerns exist that digital records only open the door to further identity theft.

According to the World Privacy Forum, medical identify theft can come in a number of forms:

- A psychiatrist in Massachusetts created false diagnoses of drug addiction and depression for patients that he had never actually treated in order to submit insurance claims for psychiatric sessions that never happened. When one of the victims applied for a job, he found out about the false diagnosis, despite never having been a patient of the psychiatrist.

- One man in Colorado received a $44,000 bill for a surgery that he had never had after his personal information was stolen.

- One thief used a Pennsylvania man's identity at five hospitals, receiving more than $100,000 worth of treatment. All of his medical records were in the victim's name.

- A Missouri thief created false driver's licenses for those whose identities she stole. Using one of the licenses, she went to a hospital, obtained the victim's health records and received a prescription.

Personal information can be stolen from hacking into computer networks or from stealing laptops. The Department of Health and Human Services says that half of all medical security breaches result from the theft of a computer or electronic device.

Source: Michael Ollove, "The Rise of Medical Identity Theft," Stateline, February 7, 2014.

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