

Your medical records are very appealing to identity thieves

Not What the Doctor Ordered

 By Sid Kirchheimer

Some do it out of need, stealing others' health coverage to get medical treatment they can't afford. But for most, it's greed.

Medical records are the mother lode for identity thieves, who call them "fulls" because "they contain everything that's needed to establish someone else's identity—Social Security numbers, addresses, sometimes payment accounts," explains security analyst Robert Vamosi of Javelin Strategy & Research in Pleasanton, Calif.

Javelin's 2010 Identity Fraud Survey Report finds that medical identity theft has more than doubled since 2008. And the National Study on Medical Identity Theft by the Ponemon Institute estimates that about a million Americans were victimized by this kind of theft within the past two years.

Another half a million, the Ponemon report finds, lent their insurance cards to uninsured loved ones in "friendly fraud" cases and ended up with big medical bills.

No safety net for victims

"This isn't like credit card fraud, where the bank eats the losses," says institute founder Larry Ponemon. "With medical identity theft, victims often have to pay for care they didn't receive. Others lose their health insurance because of the incident, or need to pay higher premiums to restore it." On average, he says,



it costs more than \$20,000 out of pocket to resolve a case of medical identity theft.

With a push by the Obama administration and others to computerize patient health records, cybercriminals see an opportunity ripe for the taking. Other thieves work as "moles" in physician and insurance offices to steal patient records.

"Unfortunately, health care organizations, in general, do not currently have the best safeguards in place," Ponemon tells the *Bulletin*.

If someone gets care using your identity, it can alter your medical records, compromising your own treatment and ability to get services. "And stolen medical records offer a complete dossier to get a passport in a victim's name that could be used for terrorism," Ponemon adds.

- How to protect yourself**
- Urge your health care providers to ask patients for photo IDs.
 - Ask your doctors to make copies of everything in your medical file (you may have to pay for them).
 - Read every letter you get from insurers, including those that say "this is not a bill." If you see a doctor's name or treatment date that isn't familiar, call the billing physician and your insurer.

■ Ask for a list of benefits paid in your name and an "accounting of disclosures," which shows who got your records.

■ Monitor your credit report at www.AnnualCreditReport.com. If you see medical billing errors, contact your insurer and the three credit bureaus, Equifax, Experian and TransUnion.

■ If you lose your insurance card, contact your insurance provider. And don't carry your Medicare card in your wallet; make a photocopy and obscure the last four digits of the Social Security number.

■ Avoid Internet and storefront offers of free treatment and supplies. □

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Sid Kirchheimer is the author of Scam-Proof Your Life, published by AARP Books/Sterling.

ASK SID

■ Which consumer complaints are the most common?

Of the more than 1.3 million consumer complaints filed with the Federal Trade Commission in 2009, one in five involved identity theft, making it the top individual category. Debt collection

was second, with almost 120,000 complaints—or 9 percent—followed by gripes about Internet services, shop-at-home and catalog sales, and counterfeit check scams. There has been nearly a sixfold increase in overall complaints to the FTC

since 2000. Per capita, Nevada residents file the most fraud complaints; Florida generates the most about identity theft.

■ Send queries to Ask Sid, 601 E St. N.W., Washington, DC 20049, or send them by e-mail to asksid@aarp.org.