Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario
Commissaire à l'information et à la protection de la vie privée de l'Ontario

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# De-identification – an essential tool for protecting privacy

**TORONTO, ON (June 25, 2014) –** As technological advances make it easier to collect, retain, use, disclose, and leverage personal information for a wide range of secondary uses, the need to protect privacy becomes more important than ever. Strong de-identification of data, prior to its use or disclosure for secondary purposes, is one of the most effective ways to protect the privacy of individuals.

Ontario's Information and Privacy Commissioner, Dr. Ann Cavoukian, and Canada Research Chair in Electronic Health Information, Dr. Khaled El Emam, have issued a new white paper, "*De-identification Protocols: Essential for Protecting Privacy.*" This paper asserts that if organizations do not strongly protect the privacy of individuals in the information being sought for secondary uses, there may be far-reaching implications for both the individuals and the organizations involved. When individuals lose their trust and confidence in the ability of an organization to protect their privacy, the reputation of that organization will be irreparably damaged in the process.

The paper also clarifies what it means to properly de-identify personal information and argues that the vast majority of information may be de-identified in a manner that provides for both a high degree of privacy protection and ensures a strong level of data quality. Although skepticism about the value of de-identification persists, it is largely unfounded. There is no substantive evidence to support the conclusion that re-identification of properly identified data is an easy task. Quite the contrary — there are considerable risks in abandoning de-identification efforts, including the fact that individuals and organizations may simply cease disclosing de-identified information for secondary purposes, even those that are vital to the public interest.

## Quotes

"De-identification remains one of our strongest and most important tools for protecting privacy," said Dr. Cavoukian. "To suggest that information may only be de-identified at the expense of data quality is based on an outdated zero-sum paradigm. We need to continue working towards perfecting de-identification techniques and re-identification risk management frameworks, thereby ensuring that de-identification remains an essential tool in protecting privacy, both now, and well into the future."

"Proper de-identification greatly reduces the risk of a privacy breach in the event that the information is lost, stolen or accessed by unauthorized persons, since it is far less likely that individuals may be identified from information that has been properly de-identified," said Dr. Khaled El Emam. "Additionally, greater use may be made of de-identified information, since it falls outside the scope of privacy legislation and is not subject to the same limitations that are imposed on the collection, use and disclosure of personally identifiable information."

Ontario
2 Bloor Street East
Suite 1400
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M4W 1A8

2, rue Bloor Est
Bureau 1400
Toronto (Ontario)
Canada M4W 1A8

Tel: (416) 326-3333
1 (800) 387-0073
Fax/Téléc: (416) 325-9195
TTY: (416) 325-7539
Web: www.ipc.on.ca

**About the IPC**
The Information and Privacy Commissioner is appointed by, and reports to, the Ontario Legislative Assembly, and is independent of the government of the day. The Commissioner's mandate includes overseeing the access and privacy provisions of *the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, as well as *the Personal Health Information Protection Act*, which applies to both public and private sector health information custodians. A vital component of the Commissioner's mandate is to help educate the public about access and privacy issues.

*Media Contact:*
Trell Huether
Media Relations Specialist
Desk: 416-326-3939
Cell: 416-873-9746
Toll-free: 800-387-0073
media@ipc.on.ca