1. No named data should be sent by fax. If it is essential, clinical information can be sent with a suitable identifier (e.g., the CHI number) and the name and address and identifier conveyed by post or telephone. Where the transmission of named data is established practice and where discontinuation of this practice would cause disruption to patient services, it is therefore essential that best practice (as described below) is followed and that a confidentiality notice used as described below in paragraph 9. In these circumstances Health Boards and Trusts should plan to switch such data exchange to the NHS Net which is being established as a secure, private network at the earliest opportunity. You should refer to NHS MEL(1996)80 for information about NHS Net and how to connect to it.

2. It is imperative that fax machines which are used for the transmission or receipt of confidential information are placed in a secure location. The machines should be operated only by authorised users and these users should fully understand their responsibilities for maintaining confidentiality.

3. The room housing the fax machine must be locked whenever unattended. If the office is in general use, consideration must be given to ensuring that unauthorised individuals are unable to read, accidentally or otherwise, faxes which are arriving or have recently arrived.

4. Where the fax machine used for confidential information is located in a safe area (e.g., a "safe haven" in a Health Board) and is the only fax machine in use by the organisation, the safe haven staff should forward any faxes not intended for their area.

5. A particular problem relates to faxes arriving outside normal hours which could be seen by cleaners or other personnel. Options to combat this include a blanket ban on transmissions outside office hours, switching machines off overnight if they are not secured and, possibly (if it does not constitute a fire hazard), locking machines (while switched on) into a cupboard. A further option involves the use of a computer to receive and store faxed data; whereby the information cannot be extracted without a password.

6. One of the most important risks with fax machines is mis-dialling, although most models display the number dialled. This can lead to...
faxes not arriving at all or arriving in an unintended location. In the latter case, there can be serious implications if non-coded confidential information is on the fax. Consideration should be given to the use of encryption between two safe havens, in appropriate cases. Best practice involves always checking the safe haven fax number before dialling; never dial from memory. Valid sources would include a locally compiled safe haven directory of a national directory, but not a general directory; alternatively, a telephone call to the safe haven should be used.

7. It is good practice to always precede the fax transmission by a telephone call to the recipient to confirm the fax number, to ensure that someone will be on hand at the machine to receive the fax and to seek confirmation from the intended recipient that the fax has been received.

8. It is good practice to identify frequently used numbers and program these into a fax machine's "memory dial" facility; equally, computer dialling facilities may be used where available. However, numbers must be tested in conjunction with a telephone call before using them for confidential information. Furthermore, the use of "memory dial" codes should be limited to safe haven numbers; this will prevent code mis-dialling having serious consequences.

9. If, in extreme circumstances where the above guidelines cannot be followed completely, non-totally anonymised patient information requires to be faxed, the fax should be preceded by a Confidentiality Notice such as:-

   This facsimile transmission is intended only for the use of the individual or entity to which it is addressed and may contain confidential information belonging to the sender which is protected by the physician-patient privilege. If you are not the intended recipient, you are hereby notified that any disclosure, copying, distribution or the taking of any action in reliance on the contents of this information is strictly prohibited. If you have received this transmission in error, please notify this office by telephone to arrange for the return of the documents.