



June 30, 2020

Dear Colleague:

COVID-19 cases in Georgia have been increasing in record-breaking numbers in recent days. To save lives and reduce the spread of COVID-19 in Georgia, and to reduce the burden on our healthcare system, we must act decisively and quickly.

The Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) has deployed more than 1,300 contact tracers statewide to connect with individuals who have tested positive for COVID-19, and to obtain information about their close contacts. In order for contact tracing to be successful, DPH must have accurate and reliable information in order to reach people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19. In many cases, you as physicians have that critical information, and I am asking that when DPH calls, please ensure that you and/or your staff will share this information with us.

Understandably, we all are concerned about privacy and the security of personal health information. I want to assure you the Department does have the legal authority to request your clients' personal health information, including contact information. Under Georgia law, the Department is authorized to gather information, including personal health information, to protect the health and safety of Georgia citizens.¹

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) also allows you to share your clients' personal health information with the Department, a public health authority. HIPAA regulations specifically allow health care providers to disclose health information to public health authorities for the purpose of preventing or controlling disease, and to avert a serious threat to the health or safety of a person or the public.² HIPAA regulations also provide that client consent is not required before sharing personal health information with the Department.³

Your patients trust you and put great faith in the advice and guidance that you share with them. You can protect the health of your patients and their families, and help Public Health, by explaining the importance of contact tracing and encouraging patients to share contact information when DPH calls. At the same time, recommend they talk directly to the people they may have been in contact with while they were infected to ask those contacts to self-quarantine.

¹ O.C.G.A. §§ 31-2A-4, 31-12-1, 31-12-2, and 31-22-7.

² 45 C.F.R. § 164.512(b) and (j).

³ *Id.*

Widespread testing and contact tracing are two of the most powerful tools we have to identify outbreaks and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. Statewide we have more than 160 specimen points of collection (SPOCs) open to everyone who wants to be tested, regardless of symptoms. In the past three weeks, we have repeatedly set daily records for the number of specimens collected.

Now we must approach contact tracing with the same urgency. We cannot be successful without your continued assistance.

Thank you for all you do every day to keep Georgians healthy, and for your support for our COVID-19 prevention efforts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kathleen E. Toomey".

Kathleen E. Toomey, M.D., M.P.H.
Commissioner & State Health Officer