

Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET – USE OF PERSONAL INFORMATION IN THE VETERANS’ MEDICINES ADVICE AND THERAPEUTICS EDUCATION SERVICES (VETERANS’ MATES) PROGRAM

Veterans’ MATES is an internationally recognised health program that has been running for 18 years. Its purpose is to improve health outcomes for veterans by encouraging the better use of medicines and health services, supporting veterans to better manage their health.

Evaluation of the program shows adverse medicine events have been reduced and veteran access to suitable health services has increased. Practitioners and veterans report they find the information useful, and veterans find it empowers them to take an active role in their own health.

More information on the program is available at [Veterans' MATES | Department of Veterans' Affairs \(dva.gov.au\)](https://www.veterans.gov.au/veterans-mates) and www.veteransmates.net.au.

How the Veterans’ MATES program uses your personal information

DVA is required to collect the billing information generated when you present your DVA card for health services, to assist with the reconciliation of health care costs with Services Australia, the agency who are processing the payments to your health providers on DVA’s behalf.

This health claims billing information also enables DVA to develop and provide you with personalised, effective health and wellbeing information, advice and support that is tailored to your personal specific health care circumstances. If you haven't used your Veteran Card there will be no billing information.

Veterans are made aware of the collection, use and sharing of information generated from using their DVA Veteran Card for purposes like the Veterans’ MATES program, through a notice included in the correspondence sent to them at the time they receive their card. This information includes how veterans can opt out of participating. DVA is currently reviewing this correspondence, together with website information about the MATES program, to ensure these notices include information which is as clear as possible.

In the Veterans’ MATES program, your health claims billing records are provided to the University of South Australia (UniSA) which is contracted by DVA to deliver the Veteran’s MATES program on DVA’s behalf, so you can receive personalised health information about the medicines you use and services you can access for your health circumstances. It is important to be aware that this health claims billing data do not contain any clinical notes or information from your health care professional.

The health claims billing records sent to UniSA, are automatically converted to de-identified data, for the research and analysis conducted in this program. Only if you are potentially at risk of medicine-related problems, is your de-identified data then re-identified within a secure environment, so UniSA can write to you and your doctor to encourage a positive conversation about your specific health care needs and a medicines review. If you have never received a letter from the Veterans’ MATES program about medication, then your identified data has never been used.

It is important to note that de-identified data is generally not considered personal information under the *Privacy Act 1988* (Privacy Act) and consent is not usually required for its use for research. Data is de-identified if it is removed or altered so that it is no longer about an identifiable individual or an individual who is reasonably identifiable.

You can find out more about how DVA manages your personal information in our privacy policy at www.dva.gov.au/privacy-policy.

How the Veterans' MATES program protects your privacy and secures your personal information

DVA takes privacy very seriously and has strict policies in place to ensure the appropriate use and protection of veterans' personal information in accordance with the Privacy Act.

Under the contractual arrangement DVA has with UniSA to deliver the Veterans' MATES program, UniSA is required to comply with the Australian Privacy Principles in respect of personal information, as if it were a Commonwealth agency. This is a requirement under the Privacy Act when a government agency enters a contract with a third party which involves the handling of personal information by the contracted service provider. Within UniSA, access to identified data is limited to a small number of security-cleared UniSA staff.

Working under a security framework, personal information is sent via a Secure File Transfer Protocol (SFTP) directly to the UniSA to a specific Veterans' MATES server. As the files are received, there is an automatic and immediate de-identification process so the data used for program purposes is de-identified. It is these de-identified records that are used for program research and analysis, and to identify whether any veterans are potentially at risk and who would benefit from receiving the program materials.

If the de-identified data shows any individuals that may be at risk, a secure process is undertaken to match and re-identify the data to the individual to write to them and their usual doctor to encourage a conversation about their health care needs.

The Veterans' MATES program data is maintained in a secure storage area (within Australia) for specific use by the program. This data is held within a secure environment as required by the Attorney General's Protective Security Policy Framework. Additionally, there are access restrictions in place and it is not linked to nor accessible to any other University system, USB port, internet or cloud based storage. Access is physically restricted to appropriately security-cleared personnel and access is logged and monitored in compliance with relevant Commonwealth and DVA security requirements. These security protocols are audited every three months.

The data is used by the Veterans' MATES program, in accordance with the ethics approvals that guide the delivery of the program to the benefit of the veteran community.

The type of personal information used in the Veteran's MATES program

The following health claims billing data (not clinical records) are used in the Veteran's MATES program. They are de-identified on transfer to UniSA. The identified data is only used when it is determined a veteran is at potential risk. The information includes:

- Name
- Address
- Date of birth
- DVA reference number
- Applicable health conditions
- Date and diagnosis codes of hospital admissions
- Date and item numbers of pharmacy, medical and allied health records including doctor visits, radiology, pharmaceutical and pathology claims
- Date and item numbers of access to DVA health programs: Veterans' Home Care, Coordinated Veterans' Care, Community Nursing and the Rehabilitation Appliance Program

How personal information is shared in the Veterans' MATES program

All information related to your health and your relationship with DVA is considered sensitive. Sensitive material is handled under a set of Standard Operating Procedures developed specifically for the Veterans' MATES program and in line with DVA requirements and guidelines.

The program materials you receive through the program are adapted and sent by UniSA to your primary doctor (patient feedback), to encourage a conversation between you both about your health care needs.

Information is also shared with Fujifilm and HealthLink, which are UniSA's sub-contracted suppliers to format, print and deliver the educational materials to you and your doctor (Fujifilm delivers via mail and HealthLink delivers via secure e-messaging). We will only share information required for those activities, which include contact information (name and address) and information contained in the materials (patient feedback) sent to your doctor. Fujifilm and Healthlink are subject to the same security requirements set in the Veterans' MATES Security Framework and do not have access to any of the other information listed above or any of your other private information.

This is a similar process DVA uses to mail to you your Veteran card and *Vetaffairs*.

If you have never received a letter from the Veterans' MATES program about medication, then your identified data has never been used or shared with Fujifilm and HealthLink.

Participating in the Veterans' MATES program

Participating in Veterans' MATES provides real benefits. Participation ensures you will receive the program's health and wellbeing information, advice and support relevant to your personal health circumstances. It also contributes your information to aggregated medicines-based data that is used to inform our health policies, practices and research about medicine prescribing and use in the Australian veteran population to ensure that veterans are accessing and receiving the very best care.

Since its inception, MATES has reached more than 300,000 veterans, helped more than 67,500 veterans access necessary care and prevented over 1400 hospitalisations.

Veterans can choose to opt out and not participate in the program. Recently, DVA has taken steps to ensure that this is clearer. For veterans who choose to opt out of participating in the program, procedures are in place to ensure the veteran's personal information is no longer included and is completely removed from the MATES program.

Noting your preference to withdraw your participation from the program, this has been actioned and your personal information will no longer be shared or used in the program (or for any other research and public health purposes) and all data already held in the program will be destroyed, including historical data. Should you have any further queries in relation to your opt out of the program, please email VETMATES@dva.gov.au



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Statement from the Department of Veterans' Affairs - Veterans' MATES program - Update

29 August 2023

The Veterans' MATES program has been operating for more than 18 years to provide a valuable proactive service addressing 'real life' health care problems in the veteran community. Specifically, the program seeks to positively change veteran medicine usage, and increase the uptake of complementary DVA funded health services, all to support veteran wellbeing and a reduction in adverse medicine events.

The University of South Australia is contracted by DVA to deliver the Veterans' MATES program on DVA's behalf.

The program takes an evidence based, targeted approach, using a team of clinical experts to develop current health and medicine information, using secure and private billing data to identify members of the veteran community who would benefit from receiving this information.

Identified data is only used to determine veterans who are at risk of medicine related problems, and facilitate DVA writing to the veteran and their doctor to bring them together to have a positive conversation that is tailored to the veteran's specific health care needs. All other data used in the program is de-identified.

DVA takes privacy very seriously, and we would like to assure veterans and families that DVA and the University of South Australia have strict policies in place including relevant research ethics approval processes to ensure the appropriate protection of personal information, and that ethics approval remains in place, guiding the delivery of the program.

Since the program's inception, the Veterans' MATES program has reached more than 300,000 veterans. Each year approximately 77,000 veterans receive health educational material from Veterans' MATES, specific to their health care needs. Veterans report they find the information useful, and that it empowers them to take an active role in their own health. This targeted and timely information and support for veterans, and their healthcare teams, has achieved many positive health outcomes across a range of health issues affecting the veteran community. Evidence shows that adverse medicine events have been reduced and that veteran access to suitable health services has increased.

We would like to reassure veterans and families that there has not been a breach of their data, and there is no systemic data security issue. The recent determination by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) relates to an individual case in 2017 whereby the individual opted out of participation in the program and DVA did not fully implement this request. DVA has unequivocally apologised for this.

Veterans have always had the ability to opt out of the program, however DVA has taken steps to more prominently communicate this, so veterans can make an informed decision about their participation.

The OAIC determination has highlighted that DVA's notices to veterans could include more information about how their billing information would be used for the purpose of the Veterans' MATES program. More information about privacy, and the ability of veterans to opt-out of the Veterans' MATES program has been added to DVA's website and Veterans' MATES program materials.

The Secretary has requested a review of the Veterans' MATES program to ensure that all requests to opt out of the program have been actioned appropriately, and to provide further assurance of compliance with the opt out provisions under the program. As part of this review, DVA has temporarily suspended provision of further data while it ensures individual requests regarding participation are dealt with, and frameworks are in place to ensure the circumstances addressed by the OAIC in its determination do not reoccur. DVA will complete this process as quickly as possible.

DVA will continue to engage with the OAIC openly and in good faith, as it looks to improve its processes.

More information about the Veterans' MATES program and the use of personal information can be found on the [Veterans' MATES page on the DVA website](#) and the [Veterans' MATES website](#).



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Statement from the Department of Veterans' Affairs - Veterans' MATES program

10 August 2023

The Veterans' MATES program has been operating for more than 18 years to provide a valuable proactive service addressing 'real life' health care problems in the veteran community. Specifically, the program seeks to positively change veteran medicine usage, and increase the uptake of complementary DVA funded health services, all to support veteran wellbeing and a reduction in adverse medicine events.

The University of South Australia is contracted by DVA to deliver the Veterans' MATES program on DVA's behalf.

The program takes an evidence based, targeted approach, using a team of clinical experts to develop current health and medicine information, using secure and private billing data to identify members of the veteran community who would benefit from receiving this information.

Identified data is only used to determine veterans who are at risk of medicine related problems, writing to the veteran and their doctor to bring them together to have a positive conversation that is tailored to the veteran's specific health care needs. All other data used in the program is de-identified.

DVA takes privacy very seriously, and we would like to assure veterans and families that DVA and the University of South Australia have strict policies in place to ensure the appropriate protection of personal information, and that ethics approval remains in place, guiding the delivery of the program.

Since the program's inception, the Veterans' MATES program has reached more than 300,000 veterans. Each year approximately 77,000 veterans receive health educational material from Veterans' MATES, specific to their health care needs. Veterans report they find the information useful, and that it empowers them to take an active role in their own health. This targeted and timely information and support for veterans, and their healthcare teams, has achieved many positive health outcomes across a range of health issues affecting the veteran community. Evidence shows that adverse medicine events have been reduced and that veteran access to suitable health services has increased.

We would like to reassure veterans and families that there has not been a breach of their data, and there is no systemic data security issue. The recent determination by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) relates to an individual case in 2017 whereby the individual opted out of participation in the program and DVA did not fully implement this request. DVA has unequivocally apologised for this.

Veterans have always had the ability to opt out of the program, however DVA has taken steps to more prominently communicate this, so veterans can make an informed decision about their participation.

The OAIC determination has highlighted that DVA's notices to veterans could include more information about how their billing information would be used for the purpose of the MATES program. More information about privacy, and the ability of veterans to opt-out of the MATES program has been added to DVA's website and MATES program materials.

The Secretary has requested a review of the MATES program to ensure that all requests to opt out of the program have been actioned appropriately, and to provide further assurance of compliance with the opt out provisions under the program.

DVA is engaging with the OAIC openly and in good faith, as it looks to improve its processes.

More information about the MATES program and the use of personal information can be found at [Veterans' MATES | Department of Veterans' Affairs \(dva.gov.au\)](#) and <https://www.veteransmates.net.au>



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs

ELECTRONIC RECORDS

NB: These documents have been obtained from an electronic record. An original hard-copy version of this record does not exist.

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QUICK ISSUES BRIEF

Minister for Veterans' Affairs

QIB – Veterans' MATES Program – Senate Question Time

Received in MO

8 August 2023

Background:

- The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) administered Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services (MATES) program aims to improve the use of medicines and related health services in the veteran community. In operation since 2004, the program relies upon DVA administrative claims data to develop and deliver information and resources to health professionals and veterans to ensure that clients' medical conditions are appropriately managed, clients use and take medicines appropriately, and clients can access suitable health services.
- A media article about the delivery of the MATES program was published in the Saturday paper on 29 July 2023.

Talking Points:

- The Veterans' Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services (MATES) Program has been addressing 'real life' health care problems in the veteran community, for 18 years.
- Professionals of the highest calibre, working under the strictest privacy standards, are using their skills to save lives.
- It is common for government agencies to engage and fund contractors to deliver services on their behalf, which can include the handling and management of personal information held by the agency. For the MATES program, this includes the handling of personal health billing data information by the contractor.
- I reassure veterans and families there has not been a breach of their data, and there is no systemic data security issue.
- DVA and the University have strict policies in place to ensure the appropriate protection of personal information, and ethics approval remains in place, guiding the delivery of the program to the benefit of the veteran community.
- Identified data is only used to write to veterans who are at risk of medicine related problems, and to the veteran's doctor to encourage a positive conversation tailored to the veteran's specific health care needs.
- For clarification, the program uses health billing data, not health professional notes, to identify those at risk. All other data used in the program is de-identified.
- Veterans are made aware of the collection, use and disclosure of information generated from using their DVA Veteran Gold, White or Orange Card for these types of purposes, at the time they receive their card.

- Veterans can always opt of participating in the program.

Program Benefits

- This important program is an evidence-based health and medicine information program that proactively targets effective health and wellbeing to those who may be at risk of an adverse medicine event.
- Evidence shows adverse medicine events have been reduced and veteran access to suitable health services has increased.
- Practitioners and veterans report they find the information useful, and veterans find it empowers them to take an active role in their own health.
- It has advised thousands of GPs and veterans about the impact of pharmaceuticals on issues such as dementia, diabetes, pain management, osteoporosis, preventing falls, tinnitus, and mental well-being.

Questions and Answers:

1. **Last week it was revealed in the Saturday paper that Veterans' Affairs has routinely transferred the very private and personal medical data of Australian veterans to the University of South Australia. This data was transferred without knowledge of or consent from any of the veterans who's information was released. None of this data has been de-identified. This realisation has come as a huge shock to the veteran community as you can imagine, whilst they are unsurprised, they are very concerned by the lack of transparency in relation to the transfer data. What exactly is being held by the University of South Australia and what is it being used for?**
 - The health billing data, including Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS), Pharmaceutical Benefits Schedule (PBS) and Repatriation Pharmaceutical Benefits Schedule (RPBS) billing data, which has been provided to the University of SA for 18 years, is de-identified for all program analysis.
 - Identified data is only used to determine veterans who are at risk of medicine related problems, writing to the veteran and their doctor to bring them together to have a positive conversation that is tailored to the veteran's specific health care needs.
 - DVA takes privacy very seriously, and I assure veterans and families that there has not been a breach of their data, that there is no systemic data security issue, and that DVA and the University of South Australia have strict policies in place to ensure the appropriate protection of personal information, and that ethics approval remains in place, guiding the delivery of the program.
 - Detailed information about the MATES program, use of health claims billing data and all program annual reports are published at the dedicated program website at <https://www.veteransmates.net.au>. A link to this dedicated program website is provided on the DVA website.

2. **The MATES page on the Department of Veterans’ Affairs website claims and I quote. The programme provides information and resources to health professionals pharmacists our clients, including veterans and their dependants. There is no mention of the University of South Australia. Could you please inform the veterans why that website has not been updated? That their information has been going to the University of South Australia?**

- On the Veterans MATES page of the DVA website, under the section titled ‘Veterans’ MATES Privacy Information’, the Department discloses the use of all data, including providing a link to the ‘Veterans MATES Privacy Collection Notice’, which states DVA will disclose information to:

“...the University of South Australia, who is our contracted supplier to deliver the Veterans’ MATES program on our behalf. It is the University of South Australia who analyse the health claims data and develop and deliver the health and wellbeing information to you and your doctor.

“You are able to withdraw yourself from this program at any time by contacting us on 1800 VETERAN (1800 838 372), using the prompt ‘Veterans’ MATES’.”

3. **Madam President. My office is receiving calls and emails from veterans with attachments from the University of South Australia itself to advise it is demanding payment from veterans who are seeking information on how their records have been used and who else they have been sent to. Does the government have any idea why Australian veterans are being asked to pay for access to medical data held by the university when it is the veterans' own data that was never approved to go out in the first place?**

- The University of South Australia has confirmed they are not issuing requests for payment for veterans to access MATES program related information.
- As at close of business on 8 August 2023, the Department understands that the University has received only one communication from a veteran seeking data as part of a Freedom for Information request, which was not on the correct form and the veteran was provided with the right template to submit the request, and no charges were made.
- DVA has sought to ensure any request of this nature from veterans is redirected to DVA, where it will be provided at no cost.

Clearance

Cleared by:	Leanne Cameron	s 47F
Contact:	First Assistant Secretary	
Division:	PDD – Program Delivery Division	



OFFICE OF THE HON MATT KEOGH MP
MINISTER FOR VETERANS' AFFAIRS
MINISTER FOR DEFENCE PERSONNEL

s 47F

s 47F

Dear s 47F

Thank you for your correspondence s 47F to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Hon Matt Keogh MP, concerning the Veterans' Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services (Veterans' MATES) program. The Minister has asked me to reply on his behalf.

I understand you have concerns about the sharing of veterans' medical data as part of Veterans' MATES, in particular, if this includes Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) and Medical Benefits Scheme (MBS) data.

In Veterans' MATES, Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) health claims billing records are provided to the University of South Australia (UniSA) which is contracted by DVA to deliver the program on DVA's behalf, so clients can receive personalised health information about the medicines they use and services they can access for their personal health circumstances.

UniSA does not have access to Medicare PBS or MBS identified data, with the exception of the DVA permitted provision of doctor addresses, used to send doctors the program health educational materials.

It is important to be aware that this health claims billing data does not contain any clinical notes or information from health care professionals.

UniSA uses DVA health claims administration billing data in the program.

It may be useful to explain that certain PBS and MBS items can be accessed by DVA clients through the Repatriation Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (RPBS) and Repatriation Medical Fee Schedule (RMFS), at reduced costs. For example, the RPBS provides access to a wide range of PBS and RPBS scheduled medicines at concessional rates. RPBS and RMFS data are included in DVA health claims billing data. The fee schedules detailing the item numbers and fees for health services provided to members of the veteran community can be found at the following link [Fee schedules | Department of Veterans' Affairs \(dva.gov.au\)](https://www.dva.gov.au/repatriation-fee-schedules).

An information sheet that explains in more detail the use and sharing of personal data in the Veterans' MATES program has been attached to this letter for your further information.

I would encourage any veterans concerned about the type or use of their health claims billing data to contact vetmates@dva.gov.au and DVA will be able to investigate an individual's data and answer any queries.

I would also like to take the opportunity to assure you that veterans' data remains protected – there is not a systemic data security issue. While I can confirm the program was the subject of a recent determination by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) regarding a veteran who had opted out of the program, it is a specific privacy determination in relation to an individual, and does not apply to all program participants.

DVA has suspended the provision of further data to UniSA while we continue to work in good faith with OAIC to ensure program processes and frameworks are in place to ensure the circumstances addressed by the OAIC in its determination do not reoccur.

Given the important issues you have raised, I have spoken with Deputy Secretary, Andrew Kefford PSM, about providing an opportunity for you to meet at a mutually convenient time to discuss any questions you have about the Veterans' MATES program. This opportunity remains available to you and I encourage you to contact Mr Kefford at Andrew.Kefford@dva.gov.au.

Thank you for taking the time to bring this matter to my attention, I trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Bergin
Chief of Staff

December 2023



MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

Chief of Staff, Minister for Veterans' Affairs

Through: First Assistant Secretary – Program
Delivery Division

.CC: N/A

Cos response - s 47F - Veteran medical data

Critical Date: Nil. Reason: Routine.

Received in MO

1 December 2023

Key points

1. s 47F contacted the Minister on s 47F concerned about the use of veterans' PBS and MBS medical data in the Veterans' MATES program, delivered by the DVA contracted supplier, UniSA.
2. s 47F claims^{s 47F} was contacted by a veteran concerned to see PBS and MBS items included in the data report they had requested from DVA that listed the veteran's data shared and used in Veterans' MATES, suggesting the program does not just use DVA health claims billing data.
3. Veterans' MATES only uses DVA health claims administration billing data in the program.
4. Veterans are able to contact DVA for advice or clarification about their personal data transferred to UniSA.
5. A Chief of Staff response has been drafted, that provides s 47F with clarification about the types of data used in the program and recommending veterans with specific queries can contact the department for further information.

Sensitivity

6. Yes – Veterans MATES Program. A determination of the Australian Information Commissioner on 26 April 2023 found that DVA breached a complainant's privacy in relation to DVA's handling of this complainant's request to opt-out of participating in the MATES program.

Background

7. The DVA administered MATES program aims to improve the use of medicines and related health services in the veteran community. In operation since 2004, the program relies upon DVA administrative claims billing data to develop and deliver information and resources to health professionals and veterans to ensure that clients' medical conditions are appropriately managed, clients use and take medicines appropriately, and clients can access suitable health services.
8. Veterans' MATES only uses DVA health claims administration billing data in the program. UniSA does not have access to Medicare PBS or MBS identified data, with the exception of the DVA permitted provision of doctor addresses, used to send doctors the program health educational materials.
9. A determination of the Australian Information Commissioner on 26 April 2023 found that DVA breached a complainant's privacy in relation to DVA's handling of this complainant's request to opt-out of participating in the MATES program. DVA did not action this appropriately, and in so doing breached the complainant's privacy. As a result of this determination and as directed, DVA issued an apology to the complainant and issued a payment of \$5,000 to the complainant for non-economic loss on 26 May 2023.

- 10. This decision related to one individual who opted-out of participating in the program. The decision did not relate to other individuals or the conduct of the entire program.
- 11. DVA has received a high volume of items of correspondence from members of the veteran community seeking further information, assurances and changes to program delivery.

Related correspondence / briefs

12. Yes – **s 47F**

Consultation

Have other Branches/Agencies been consulted?

No Yes

Comments:

Summary of attachments

- Attachment A** CoS Response letter
- Attachment B** Veterans MATES Information Sheet

Clearance

Cleared by:	David Pullen, Acting First Assistant Secretary, Program Delivery Division	s 47F
Contact:	Sarah Kennedy, Assistant Secretary, Client Programs	s 47F
Division:	PDD - Program Delivery Division	

Client Support

Contact:	Sarah Kennedy, Assistant Secretary, Client Programs	s 47F
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s 47F

Dept response – Subject: s 47F – MATES

Information release to UniSA

s 47F

Dear s 47F

USE OF PERSONAL INFORMATION IN VETERANS' MATES

Thank you for your correspondence on s 47F to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Hon Matt Keogh MP, regarding concerns about the use and protections of your personal information in the Veterans' Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services program (Veterans' MATES). The Minister has asked me to respond on his behalf.

The information provided to you previously about the Veterans' MATES program was intended to clarify misinformation in recent media articles, and provide transparency and an assurance about the benefits of the program, and the privacy and security arrangements for the use of any personal information. I am sorry for any distress this may have caused you.

I would like to take the opportunity to assure you that veterans' data remains protected – there is not a systemic data security issue. While I can confirm the program was the subject of a recent determination by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) regarding a veteran who had opted out of the program, it is a specific privacy determination in relation to an individual, and does not apply to all program participants.

DVA takes privacy very seriously and I can assure you there is not a systemic data security issue. DVA and our contracted program supplier the University of South Australia (UniSA), have strict policies in place to ensure the appropriate protection of personal information, and the data is used in accordance with the ethics approvals that guide the delivery of the program.

The attached Information Sheet provides some more detail about the type, use and protections of personal information used in Veterans' MATES. This clarifies all data used in program research and analysis is de-identified health claims billing information and does not contain clinical details. Only when a client is considered potentially at risk, or to benefit from receiving the health education, is a secure process undertaken to match and re-identify the data to the individual to write to them and their usual doctor to encourage a conversation about their health care needs. If a veteran has never received a letter from the program, their data has never been re-identified.

Veterans' MATES has been operating for more than 18 years to provide a valuable proactive service that seeks to positively change medicine usage in the veteran community, and increase the uptake of complementary DVA funded health services, all to support veteran community wellbeing and a reduction in adverse medicine events.

Each year through the program, the veteran community receives health and wellbeing information, advice and support specific to their health care needs. The veteran community report they find the information useful, and that it empowers them to take an active role in

their own health. This targeted and timely information and support for the veteran community, and their healthcare teams, has achieved many positive health outcomes across a range of health issues affecting the veteran community.

Individuals are made aware of the collection, use and sharing of information generated from using their DVA Veteran Card for purposes like the Veterans' MATES program, through notice included in: the correspondence sent to them at the time of issue and re-issue their DVA health care card(s); claim forms; and privacy collection notices and privacy policies on the DVA and UniSA websites.

DVA has suspended the provision of further data to UniSA while we continue to work in good faith with OAIC to ensure program processes and frameworks are in place to ensure the circumstances addressed in the OAIC determination do not reoccur. We hope to complete this as soon as possible.

For clients who choose to opt-out of participation in the program, procedures are in place to ensure their personal information is no longer included and is completely removed from the program. If after reading the detail provided in the Information Sheet you wish to opt out of participating, please email VETMATES@dva.gov.au or call 1800 VETERAN (1800 838 372).

Thank you for taking the time to bring this matter to my attention. I trust this information is of assistance.

David Pullen
A/First Assistant Secretary
Program Delivery Division
29 November 2023

Issue

- **s 47F** contacted the Minister for Veterans' Affairs (DVA) on **s 47F** seeking to understand the use of ^{s 47F} personal information being provided to University of South Adelaide (UniSA) as part of the Veterans' Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services program (Veterans' MATES) program.
- **s 47F** received information from DVA about the use of ^{s 47F} personal data following a Freedom of Information request that was prompted by the publication of media articles and parliamentary comments that alleged concerns about the use of veterans' personal information in relation to Veterans' MATES.
- DVA is receiving a large number of these types of requests following the publication of recent media articles that alleged a number of concerns about the privacy protections associated with veterans' personal information, in relation to the Veterans' MATES program
- The draft response advises of the steps DVA is taking related to reviewing, managing and addressing **s 47F** concerns that is shared by some members of the veteran community.

Outcome

- There is not a systemic data security issue in the Veterans' MATES program, nor has there been any breach in the UniSA data protections.
- The draft response advises of the steps DVA is taking related to reviewing, managing and addressing **s 47F** concerns that is shared by some members of the veteran community.

Background for Minister's Office

- The DVA administered MATES program aims to improve the use of medicines and related health services in the veteran community. In operation since 2004, the program relies upon DVA administrative claims billing data to develop and deliver information and resources to health professionals and veterans to ensure that clients' medical conditions are appropriately managed, clients use and take medicines appropriately, and clients can access suitable health services.
- A determination of the Australian Information Commissioner on 26 April 2023 found that DVA breached a complainant's privacy in relation to DVA's handling of this complainant's request to opt-out of participating in the MATES program. DVA did not action this appropriately, and in so doing breached the complainant's privacy. As a result of this determination and as directed, DVA issued an apology to the complainant and issued a payment of \$5,000 to the complainant for non-economic loss on 26 May 2023.
- This decision related to one individual who opted-out of participating in the program. The decision did not relate to other individuals or the conduct of the entire program.
- Two media articles about the determination and the delivery of the MATES program were published on 29 July 2023 and 12 August 2023.
- Since this time, DVA has received a high volume of items of correspondence from members of the veteran community seeking further information, assurances and changes to program delivery.
- There are a number of existing briefings on this matter (the most recent is at **s 47F** .

Clearance

Cleared by:	David Pullen, A/First Assistant Secretary, Program Delivery	s 47F
Contact:	Sarah Kennedy, Assistant Secretary, Client Programs	s 47F
Division:	Program Delivery Division	

s 47F

Subject: s 47F – Veterans’ MATES program

Response

- A departmental proposed response to s 47F has been drafted at Attachment A.

Issue

- s 47F contacted the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs on s 47F, concerned about the use, sharing and protections of s 47F personal details as part of the Veterans’ MATES program, delivered by the DVA contracted supplier, the University of South Australia (UniSA).
- This query and the current concern in the veteran community was prompted by the publication of a media article in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023, that alleged a number of concerns about the privacy protections associated with veterans’ personal information, in relation to the Veterans’ MATES program.
- s 47F also sought an update on the DVA claims backlog.

Outcome

- There is not a systemic data security issue in the Veterans’ MATES program, nor has there been any breach in the UniSA data protections.
- The draft response refers s 47F to the DVA statements on this matter published on 10 and 29 August 2023, and provides supplementary useful information relevant to s 47F queries.

Background for Minister’s Office

- The DVA administered MATES program aims to improve the use of medicines and related health services in the veteran community. In operation since 2004, the program relies upon DVA administrative claims billing data to develop and deliver information and resources to health professionals and veterans to ensure that clients’ medical conditions are appropriately managed, clients use and take medicines appropriately, and clients can access suitable health services.
- A determination of the Australian Information Commissioner on 26 April 2023, found that DVA breached a complainant’s privacy in relation to DVA’s handling of this complainant’s request to opt-out of participating in the MATES program. DVA did not action this appropriately, and in so doing breached the complainant’s privacy. As a result of this determination and as directed, DVA issued an apology to the complainant and issued a payment of \$5,000 to the complainant for non-economic loss on 26 May 2023.
- This decision related to one individual who opted-out of participating in the program. The decision did not relate to other individuals or the conduct of the entire program.
- A media article about the determination and the delivery of the MATES program was published in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023, and a second article in the NT News on 12 August 2023.
- There are a number of existing briefings on this matter (the most recent is at s 47F and this proposed response aligns with the previously approved approach at s 47F

Clearance

Cleared by: Leanne Cameron, First Assistant Secretary,
Program Delivery

Contact: Sarah Kennedy, Assistant Secretary, Client
Programs

Division: Program Delivery Division

s 47F

s 47F



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs

s 47F

Dear s 47F ,

Thank you for your correspondence of s 47F , to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Hon Matt Keogh MP, concerning the Veterans' Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services (Veterans' MATES) program. The Minister has asked me to respond on his behalf, and I apologise for the delay in responding.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) is aware of the media publication in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023, regarding the Veterans' MATES program and is sorry for any confusion or distress this may have caused yourself and the veteran community.

To ensure veterans and families have access to correct information about the program, the Department published a statement on the front page of DVA's website responding to this matter on 10 August 2023, and this was further updated on 29 August 2023 (**Attachment A**). Please also find attached an Information Paper that seeks to provide additional information about the program and answer your specific queries (**Attachment B**).

Veterans' MATES is a health program that has been running for 18 years. Its purpose is to improve health outcomes for veterans by encouraging better use of medicines and health services, supporting veterans to better manage their health. Evaluation from the program indicates a reduction in adverse medicine events and increased veteran access to suitable health services. More information on the program is available at [Veterans' MATES | Department of Veterans' Affairs \(dva.gov.au\)](#) and www.veteransmates.net.au.

The program employs an evidence-based approach, using a team of clinical experts from the University of South Australia (UniSA) to conduct research. Research is undertaken by the UniSA using de-identified data to develop new health and medicinal advice for veterans and their treating medical professionals. Where an individual may be at risk or is due for a review of their health care, vetted staff within the Veterans' MATES team will then re-identify the data and contact the veteran and their treating medical professional to encourage a conversation about their specific health care needs. If a client has never received a letter from the Veterans' MATES program about medication, their identified data has never been used.

Veterans are made aware of the collection, use and sharing of the health claims billing information generated from using their DVA Veteran Card, for these types of purposes, at the

time they receive their card. DVA is taking steps to ensure these notices include information which is as clear as possible.

DVA records indicate you were initially issued with your DVA card on **s 47F**

At the time, advice about the sharing of your billing information generated from the use of your DVA-issued card was provided in the accompanying letters.

Early advice stated:

By taking delivery of your new Repatriation Health Care Card you acknowledge that:

- 1. Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) may disclose some of your personal information to Medicare Australia for the purpose of assigning you an Individual Healthcare Identifier;*
- 2. DVA may provide: information to a contracted organisation on the nature and/or quantity of medicines prescribed to you for the purpose of assessing potentially hazardous dosages and/or medicine combinations; and your doctor(s) with advice on the nature and/or quantity of medicines prescribed to you, including advice of potentially hazardous dosages and /or medicine combinations.*

The most recent advice stated:

The privacy and security of your personal information is important to us, and is protected by law. We need to collect, use and disclose information generated from using your DVA Veteran Card to administer and process treatment and payments, and to provide services to you. We may also use or disclose this personal information for public health purposes such as research and investigations, or to improve the wellbeing, treatment, services and outcomes for veterans.

By using this DVA Veteran Card you consent to us collecting, using and disclosing information about its use. You also acknowledge DVA may disclose your personal information to third parties, including Services Australia and medical and health professionals, in accordance with our privacy policy.

If you have no objections to your personal information being used for research or other public health purposes, you do not need to do anything. We will continue to collect, use and disclose your personal information based on an understanding that you do not object.

If you do object to your personal information being used for these purposes, please email us at privacy.enquiries@dva.gov.au or go to www.dva.gov.au/general-enquiries and follow the prompts to send us a message. You can also ask your delegate or nominated contact (if you have one) to call or write to us.

Go to www.dva.gov.au/privacy to see DVA's privacy policy.

The UniSA is contracted by DVA to deliver the Veterans' MATES program on DVA's behalf. Under this contractual arrangement, UniSA is required to comply with the Australian Privacy Principles as if it were a Commonwealth agency, in respect of its activities under the contract. DVA and UniSA take privacy very seriously and have strict policies in place to ensure the appropriate use and protection of veterans' personal information. I would like to assure you that Veterans' data remains protected – there is not a systemic data security issue in the program, nor has there been any breach in data protections. This is contrary to what has been reported in the public domain.

Participating in Veterans' MATES provides real benefits. While veterans have always had the ability to opt-out of participating, we do acknowledge this may not have been as clearly messaged as it could have been. For clients who choose to opt-out, procedures are in place to ensure the client's personal information is no longer included and is completely removed from program.

Noting your preference to withdraw your participation, this has been actioned and confirmed with you on **S 47F**. Should you have any further queries in relation to your opt out of the program, please email VETMATES@dva.gov.au.

In response to your query about the progress of DVA managing the very high number of claims, I can assure you that DVA is committed to providing the veteran community with information on claims processing to provide greater transparency on our progress in addressing the claims backlog. Each month the Department will publish information on processing times on the DVA website, see dva.gov.au/claim-processing. This data includes claims lodged and claims determined as well as average claims processing timeframes.

DVA reviews claims when they are first received to prioritise them based on risk factors. In these cases, DVA can offer immediate support such as professional counselling and links to service providers who can provide financial assistance.

Cutting waiting times, improving the claims processing system and addressing the claims backlog is a top priority for the Australian Government. The Australian government has committed significant additional funding to DVA, including \$233.9 million for 500 new frontline staff to eliminate the compensations claims backlog. On current projections, and with these additional resources, DVA will now get through the claims backlog by early 2024.

DVA has also implemented measures to ensure veterans and their families can access the support they need while their claims are being determined, including:

- providing upfront access to mental health care and access to medical treatment for common conditions pending finalisation of a claim, including via Non-Liability Health Care for mental health care and Provisional Access to Medical Treatment;
- providing interim financial support for mental health claims via the Veteran Payment;
- making interim payments for Permanent Impairment cases; and
- working with the Department of Defence to identify members who are transitioning out of service, in particular those who are being medically discharged, to prioritise a claim so they have continuity of health services.

Thank you for taking the time to bring this matter to my attention. I trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Leanne Cameron
First Assistant Secretary
Program Delivery Division
October 2023



MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

Minister for Veterans' Affairs

Through: Deputy Secretary Policy & Programs

CC: N/A

MINREP - LITTLEPROUD, David MP obo s 47F

- MATES program

Critical Date: Nil

Reason: Routine

Received in MO
4 December 2023

Key points

1. The Office for the Hon David Littleproud MP, contacted you on s 47F on behalf of s 47F, a veteran regarding use of s 47F personal information s 47F being provided to University of South Adelaide (UniSA) as part of the MATES program.
2. The draft response advises there has not been a systemic data protections breach in MATES, outlines steps the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) is taking related to reviewing the program and gives advice on how s 47F can opt out of participating if preferred.

Financial Implications

3. No.

Background

4. The MATES program aims to improve the use of medicines and related health services in the veteran community. A determination of the Australian Information Commissioner on 26 April 2023, found that DVA breached a complainant's privacy in relation to DVA's handling of this complainant's request to opt-out of participating in the Veterans' MATES program. This decision related to one individual who opted-out of participating in the program.

Sensitivities

5. Yes. DVA continues to respond individually to correspondence from members of the veteran community seeking further information, assurances and changes to program delivery.

Stakeholders

6. No.

Summary of attachments

Attachment A Response letter to Mr Littleproud

Clearance

Cleared by:	David Pullen, A/First Assistant Secretary	s 47F
Contact:	Sarah Kennedy, Assistant Secretary, Client Programs Branch	s 47F
Division:	PDD – Client Programs Branch	
Consultation:		



**THE HON MATT KEOGH MP
MINISTER FOR VETERANS' AFFAIRS
MINISTER FOR DEFENCE PERSONNEL**

MC23-004791

The Hon David Littleproud MP
Member for Maranoa
PO Box 641
DALBY QLD 4405

Dear Mr Littleproud,

USE OF PERSONAL INFORMATION IN VETERANS' MATES

Thank you for your representation of s 47F (on behalf of s 47F) regarding s 47F concerns about the use and protections of s 47F personal information in the Veterans' Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services program (Veterans' MATES).

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) has recently published a statement in relation to the Veterans' MATES program, which can be reviewed at www.dva.gov.au. This statement outlines the purpose and benefits of Veterans' MATES and was intended to advise veterans and families of a determination by Australian Information Commissioner on 26 April 2023 relevant to the program, and clarify it is related to the circumstances of an individual case and does not relate to other individuals or the conduct of the entire program.

Veterans and families were also advised that DVA has temporarily paused the sharing of personal data for Veterans' MATES, while it reviews the program to ensure the circumstances addressed by the determination do not reoccur. DVA will complete this process as quickly as possible.

DVA takes privacy very seriously and I can assure you there is not a systemic data security issue. DVA and our contracted program supplier the University of South Australia (UniSA), have strict policies in place to ensure the appropriate protection of personal information, and the data is used in accordance with the ethics approvals that guide the delivery of the program.

The attached Information Sheet provides some more detail about the type, use and protections of personal information used in Veterans' MATES. This clarifies all data used in program research and analysis is de-identified health claims billing information and does not contain clinical details. Only when a client is considered potentially at risk, or to benefit from receiving the health education, is a secure process undertaken to match and re-identify the

data to the individual to write to them and their usual doctor to encourage a conversation about their health care needs. If a veteran has never received a letter from the program, their data has never been re-identified.

Veterans' MATES has been operating for more than 18 years to provide a valuable proactive service that seeks to positively change medicine usage in the veteran community, and increase the uptake of complementary DVA funded health services, all to support veteran community wellbeing and a reduction in adverse medicine events.

Each year through the program, the veteran community receives health and wellbeing information, advice and support specific to their health care needs. The veteran community report they find the information useful, and that it empowers them to take an active role in their own health. This targeted and timely information and support for the veteran community, and their healthcare teams, has achieved many positive health outcomes across a range of health issues affecting the veteran community.

The program also contributes information to the aggregated medicines-based data that is used to inform health policies, practices and research about medicine prescribing and use in the Australian veteran population to ensure that veterans are accessing and receiving the very best care.

For clients who choose to opt-out and not participate in the program, procedures are in place to ensure the client's personal information is no longer included and is completely removed from the program. Should s 47F wish to opt out, she can email vetmates@dva.gov.au or call 1800 VETERAN (1800 838 372).

Thank you for taking the time to bring this matter to my attention. I trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

s 47F

HON MATT KEOGH MP

2 \ December 2023

Encl.

EMAIL RESPONSE

Email response – s 47F

– Veterans' MATES program

Proposed Response

s 47F

Dear s 47F

Thank you for your correspondence of 7s 47F to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Hon Matt Keogh MP, concerning the Veterans' Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services (Veterans' MATES) program. The Minister has asked me to respond on his behalf, and I apologise for the delay in responding.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) is aware of the media publication in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023, regarding the Veterans' MATES program and is sorry for any confusion or distress this may have caused yourself and the veteran community.

To ensure veterans and families have access to correct information about the program, the Department published a statement on the front page of DVA's website responding to this matter on 10 August 2023 and this was further updated on 29 August 2023 (**Attachment A**). Please also find attached an Information Paper that seeks to provide additional information about the program (**Attachment B**).

Veterans' MATES is a health program that has been running for 18 years. Its purpose is to improve health outcomes for veterans by encouraging better use of medicines and health services, supporting veterans to better manage their health. Evaluation from the program indicates a reduction in adverse medicine events and increased veteran access to suitable health services. More information on the program is available at [Veterans' MATES | Department of Veterans' Affairs \(dva.gov.au\)](#) and www.veteransmates.net.au.

The program employs an evidence-based approach, using a team of clinical experts from the University of South Australia (UniSA) to conduct research. Research is undertaken by the UniSA using de-identified data to develop new health and medicinal advice for veterans and their treating medical professionals. Where an individual may be at risk or is due for a review of their health care, vetted staff within the Veterans' MATES team will then re-identify the data and contact the veteran and their treating medical professional to encourage a conversation about their specific health care needs. If a client has never received a letter from the Veterans' MATES program about medication, their identified data has never been used.

Veterans are made aware of the collection, use and sharing of the health claims billing information generated from using their DVA Veteran Card, for these types of purposes, at the time they receive their card. DVA is taking steps to ensure these notices include information which is as clear as possible.

DVA records indicate you were initially issued with your DVA card on **s 47F** . At the time, advice about the sharing of your billing information generated from the use of your DVA-issued card was provided in the accompanying letter, stating:

The privacy and security of your personal information is important to us, and is protected by law. We need to collect, use and disclose information generated from using your DVA Veteran Card to administer and process treatment and payments, and to provide services to you. We may also use or disclose this personal information for public health purposes such as research and investigations, or to improve the wellbeing, treatment, services and outcomes for veterans.

By using this DVA Veteran Card you consent to us collecting, using and disclosing information about its use. You also acknowledge DVA may disclose your personal information to third parties, including Services Australia and medical and health professionals, in accordance with our privacy policy.

If you have no objections to your personal information being used for research or other public health purposes, you do not need to do anything. We will continue to collect, use and disclose your personal information based on an understanding that you do not object.

If you do object to your personal information being used for these purposes, please email us at privacy.enquiries@dva.gov.au or go to www.dva.gov.au/general-enquiries and follow the prompts to send us a message. You can also ask your delegate or nominated contact (if you have one) to call or write to us.

Go to www.dva.gov.au/privacy to see DVA's privacy policy.

The same information was included in the subsequent letter that accompanied the re-issue of your card on **s 47F**

The UniSA is contracted by DVA to deliver the Veterans' MATES program on DVA's behalf. Under this contractual arrangement, UniSA is required to comply with the Australian Privacy Principles as if it were a Commonwealth agency, in respect of its activities under the contract.

DVA and UniSA take privacy very seriously and have strict policies in place to ensure the appropriate use and protection of veterans' personal information. I would like to assure you that Veterans' data remains protected – there is not a systemic data security issue in the program, nor has there been any breach in data protections. This is contrary to what has been reported in the public domain.

Participating in Veterans' MATES provides real benefits. While veterans have always had the ability to opt-out of participating, we do acknowledge this may not have been as clearly messaged as it could have been. For clients who choose to opt-out, procedures are in place to ensure the client's personal information is no longer included and is completely removed from program.

Noting your preference to withdraw your participation, I can confirm this has been actioned and your personal information has been removed from the program, including historical data. Should you have any further queries in relation to your opt out of the program, please email VETMATES@dva.gov.au.

s 47F

I am also aware you have requested access to any information of yours included in the Veterans' MATES program that DVA acknowledged on s 47F. This request is being processed and the relevant area of Department will be in touch with you as soon as that request is completed.

Thank you for taking the time to bring this matter to my attention. I trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

s 47F

Leanne Cameron
First Assistant Secretary
Program Delivery Division

October 2023

Subject: s 47F program

– Veterans’ MATES

Response

- A departmental proposed response to s 47F has been drafted at Attachment A.

Issue

- s 47F contacted the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs on s 47F concerned about the use, sharing and protections of s 47F personal details s 47F as part of the Veterans’ MATES program, delivered by the DVA contracted supplier, University of South Australia (UniSA).
- This query and the current concern in the veteran community was prompted by the publication of a media article in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023 that alleged a number of concerns about the privacy protections associated with veterans’ personal information, in relation to the Veterans’ MATES program.
- s 47F also requested to receive information about s 47F personal information shared in the Veterans’ MATES program.

Outcome

- There is not a systemic data security issue in the Veterans’ MATES program, nor has there been any breach in the UniSA data protections.
- The draft response refers s 47F to the DVA statements on this matter published on 10 and 29 August 2023 and provides supplementary useful information relevant to s 47F query.
- s 47F request for information has been referred to the Information Access Unit, who are currently processing s 47F application. s 47F

Background for Minister’s Office

- The DVA administered MATES program aims to improve the use of medicines and related health services in the veteran community. In operation since 2004, the program relies upon DVA administrative claims billing data to develop and deliver information and resources to health professionals and veterans to ensure that clients’ medical conditions are appropriately managed, clients use and take medicines appropriately, and clients can access suitable health services.
- A determination of the Australian Information Commissioner on 26 April 2023 found that DVA breached a complainant’s privacy in relation to DVA’s handling of this complainant’s request to opt-out of participating in the MATES program. DVA did not action this appropriately, and in so doing breached the complainant’s privacy. As a result of this determination and as directed, DVA issued an apology to the complainant and issued a payment of \$5,000 to the complainant for non-economic loss on 26 May 2023.
- This decision related to one individual who opted-out of participating in the program. The decision did not relate to other individuals or the conduct of the entire program.

- A media article about the determination and the delivery of the MATES program was published in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023, and a second article in the NT News on 12 August 2023.
- There are a number of existing briefings on this matter (the most recent is at **s 47F** and this proposed response aligns with the previously approved approach at **s 47F**

Clearance

Cleared by:	Leanne Cameron, First Assistant Secretary, Program Delivery	s 47F
Contact:	Sarah Kennedy, Assistant Secretary, Client Programs	s 47F
Division:	Program Delivery Division	



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs

s 47F

Dear s 47F

Thank you for your correspondence of s 47F to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Hon Matt Keogh MP, concerning the Veterans' Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services (Veterans' MATES) program. The Minister has asked me to respond on his behalf, and I apologise for the delay in responding.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) is aware of the recent media regarding the Veterans' MATES program and is sorry for any confusion or distress this may have caused yourself and the veteran community.

To ensure veterans and families have access to correct information about the program, the Department published a statement on the front page of DVA's website responding to this matter on 10 August 2023 and this was further updated on 29 August 2023 (Attachment A). Please also find attached an Information Paper that seeks to provide additional information and answer queries veterans may have about the program (Attachment B).

Veterans' MATES is a health program that has been running for 18 years. Its purpose is to improve health outcomes for veterans by encouraging better use of medicines and health services, supporting veterans to better manage their health. Evaluation from the program shows adverse medicine events have been reduced and veteran access to suitable health services has increased. More information about the program is available at [Veterans' MATES | Department of Veterans' Affairs \(dva.gov.au\)](#) and www.veteransmates.net.au.

The program employs an evidence-based approach, using a team of clinical experts from the University of South Australian (UniSA) to conduct research. Research is undertaken by UniSA using de-identified data to develop new health and medicinal advice for veterans and their treating medical professionals. Where an individual may potentially be at risk or is due for a review of their health care, vetted staff within the Veterans' MATES team will then re-identify the data and contact the veteran and their treating medical professional to encourage a conversation about their specific health care needs.

Veterans are made aware of the collection, use and sharing of the health claims billing information generated from using their DVA Veteran Card, for these types of purposes, at

the time they receive their card. DVA is taking steps to ensure these notices include information which is as clear as possible.

UniSA is contracted by DVA to deliver the Veterans' MATES program on DVA's behalf. Under this contractual arrangement, UniSA is required to comply with the Australian Privacy Principles as if it were a Commonwealth agency, in respect of its activities under the contract.

DVA and UniSA take privacy very seriously and have strict policies in place to ensure the appropriate use and protection of veterans' personal information. I would like to assure you that Veterans' data remains protected – there is not a systemic data security issue in the program, nor has there been any systemic breach in data protections. This is contrary to what has been reported in the public domain.

Participating in Veterans' MATES provides real benefits. While veterans have always had the ability to opt-out of participating, we do acknowledge this may not have been as clearly messaged as it could have been.

For clients who choose to opt-out, procedures are in place to ensure the client's personal information is no longer included and is completely removed from the program. Should you have any further queries in relation to the program or wish to opt out of participating, please email VETMATES@dva.gvo.au

Thank you for taking the time to bring this matter to my attention, I trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

S 47F

Leanne Cameron
First Assistant Secretary
Program Delivery Division

October 2023

Issue

- s 47F contacted the Minister on s 47F concerned about the use, sharing and protections of veterans' personal details as part of the Veterans' MATES program, delivered by the DVA contracted supplier, UniSA.
- This query was prompted by the publication of a media article in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023 and subsequent statements by Senator Lambie that alleged a number of concerns about the privacy protections associated with veterans' personal information, in relation to the Veterans' MATES program.

Outcome

- There is not a systemic data security issue in the Veterans' MATES program, nor has there been any breach in the UniSA data protections.
- The draft response refers s 47F to the DVA statements on this matter published on s 47F and provides supplementary useful information.

Background for MO use

- The DVA administered MATES program aims to improve the use of medicines and related health services in the veteran community. In operation since 2004, the program relies upon DVA administrative claims billing data to develop and deliver information and resources to health professionals and veterans to ensure that clients' medical conditions are appropriately managed, clients use and take medicines appropriately, and clients can access suitable health services.
- A determination of the Australian Information Commissioner on 26 April 2023 found that DVA breached a complainant's privacy in relation to DVA's handling of this complainant's request to opt-out of participating in the MATES program. DVA did not action this appropriately, and in so doing breached the complainant's privacy. As a result of this determination and as directed, DVA issued an apology to the complainant and issued a payment of \$5,000 to the complainant for non-economic loss on 26 May 2023.
- This decision related to one individual who opted-out of participating in the program. The decision did not relate to other individuals or the conduct of the entire program.
- A media article about the determination and the delivery of the MATES program was published in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023, and a second article in the NT News on 12 August 2023.
- There are a number of existing briefings on this matter (the most recent is at s 47F and this response aligns with previously approved approach to these types of program queries (s 47F

Clearance

Cleared by:	Leanne Cameron, First Assistant Secretary, Program Delivery	s 47F
Contact:	Sarah Kennedy, Assistant Secretary, Client Programs	s 47F
Division:	Program Delivery Division	



EMAIL RESPONSE

Minister for Veterans' Affairs

Email response - LEY MP, Sussan obo s 47F disclosure

- Allegations of medical record

Proposed Response

Dear Ms Ley,

ALLEGATIONS OF MEDICAL RECORDS DISCLOSURES

Thank you for your representation of s 47F on behalf of s 47F, regarding allegations of veterans' medical record disclosures through the Veterans' Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services program (Veterans' MATES).

The Minister is aware of the media publication in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023, regarding the Veterans' MATES program. The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) published a statement in relation to this matter on 10 August 2023 (Attachment A), which can also be reviewed at [Homepage | Department of Veterans' Affairs \(dva.gov.au\)](https://www.dva.gov.au/homepage).

DVA takes privacy very seriously and the case considered by the Office of Australian Information Commission is not an indication of systemic data security issue. DVA and the University of South Australia (UniSA) have strict policies in place to ensure the appropriate protection of personal information, and ethics approval remains in place, guiding the delivery of the program.

Established by the Howard Government in 2004, the Veterans' MATES program has been operating for more than 18 years to provide a valuable proactive service addressing real life health care problems in the veteran community. Specifically, the program seeks to positively change veteran medicine usage, and increase the uptake of complementary DVA funded health services, all to support veteran wellbeing and a reduction in adverse medicine events. Evidence from the program shows adverse medicine events have been reduced and veteran access to suitable health services has increased. Additionally, practitioners and veterans report they find the information useful, and veterans find it empowers them to take a more active role in their own health.

Veterans are made aware of the collection, use and disclosure of information generated from using their DVA Veteran Card, for these types of purposes, at the time they receive their card. Additionally, the program's DVA website (<https://www.dva.gov.au/get-support/providers/health-programs-and-services-our-clients/medicines/veterans-mates>), under the section titled 'Veterans' MATES Privacy Information', the DVA discloses the use of all data, including providing a link to the 'Veterans MATES Privacy Collection Notice' (<https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/dva-mates-pcn.pdf>), which states DVA will disclose information to:

“...the University of South Australia, who is our contracted supplier to deliver the Veterans' MATES program on our behalf. It is the University of South Australia who analyse the health claims data and develop and deliver the health and wellbeing information to you and your doctor.”

For clients who choose to opt-out, procedures are in place to ensure the client's personal information is no longer included and is completely removed from the MATES program. Should s 47F wish

to withdraw ^{s 47F} participation from the program or seek additional information, ^{s 47F} is encouraged to call 1800 VETERAN (1800 838 372) or email privacy.enquiries@dva.gov.au.

Thank you for taking the time to bring this matter to my attention. I trust this information is of assistance.

Issue

- The Office for the Hon Sussan Ley contacted the Minister on **s 47F** on behalf of **s 47F**, a veteran who is seeking to understand the use and protections of any veterans' personal details being provided to University of South Adelaide as part of the Veterans' Medicines Advice and Therapeutics Education Services program (Veterans' MATES) program.
- This query was prompted by the publication of a media article in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023 that alleged a number of concerns about the disclosure and use of veterans' personal information and associated privacy protections, in relation to the Veterans' MATES program.

Outcome

- There is not a systemic data security issue in the Veterans' MATES program, nor has there been any breach in data protections.
- The draft response refers Ms Ley to the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) statement on this matter published on 10 August 2023 and provides details on how **s 47F** is able to seek more information or opt-out of participating in the program.

Background for MO use

- The DVA administered MATES program aims to improve the use of medicines and related health services in the veteran community. In operation since 2004, the program relies upon DVA administrative claims billing data to develop and deliver information and resources to health professionals and veterans to ensure that clients' medical conditions are appropriately managed, clients use and take medicines appropriately, and clients can access suitable health services.
- A determination of the Australian Information Commissioner on 26 April 2023 found that DVA breached a complainant's privacy in relation to DVA's handling of this complainant's request to opt-out of participating in the MATES program. DVA did not action this appropriately, and in so doing breached the complainant's privacy. As a result of this determination and as directed, DVA issued an apology to the complainant and issued a payment of \$5,000 to the complainant for non-economic loss on 26 May 2023.
- It is important to note, the decision relates to one individual who opted-out of participating in the program. The decision did not relate to other individuals or the conduct of the entire program.
- A media article about the determination and the delivery of the MATES program was published in The Saturday Paper on 29 July 2023, and a second article in the NT News on 12 August 2023.
- There are a number of existing briefings on this matter (the most recent is at **s 47F**

Clearance

Cleared by: Leanne Cameron, First Assistant Secretary,
Program Delivery
Contact: Sarah Kennedy, Assistant Secretary, Client
Programs

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Division: | Program Delivery Division |

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VETERANS' MATES PROGRAM

KEY ISSUES

- On 12 August, Rick Morton, The Saturday Paper, inferred that a determination made by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) uncovered a mass, program wide, data breach.
- There has been NO systemic data breach or data security issue.
- Importantly, the OAIC decision is limited to an individual case, not the program as a whole.

ACTION

- A number of program improvements were proactively made by DVA, in preparation of the commencement of the 2023 contractual arrangements continuing the delivery of the Veterans' MATES program.
 - embedded privacy and security protections to govern program processes, in the March 2023 contract
 - program materials and website privacy collection notices were increased and enhanced between November 2022 and June 2023, to more clearly explain the use and protections of personal information in the program, and the ability for people to opt-out of participating.
- The impact from the public media following the OAIC determination has resulted in 1,000+ enquiries from clients. The majority of these are information requests, with less than 1 per cent privacy complaints and requests to opt out.
- Since the OAIC determination and following the concerns raised in the veteran community, DVA has taken additional steps to provide assurance about the program:
 - issued a public statement about Veterans' Medicine Advice and Therapeutics Education Services (MATES) on the DVA website (10 and 29 August 2023) **(Attachment B)**
 - temporarily suspended provision of further data to the University while it ensures individual requests regarding participation are dealt with (25 August 2023)
 - reviewing the program's privacy and opt-out notices, to ensure the information provided to veterans is as clear as possible
 - conducted an independent Assurance and Compliance Review on the program's opt out processes and actions (completed 28 September 2023)

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- working with OAIC to ensure frameworks are in place to ensure the circumstances raised by the OAIC in its determination do not reoccur
- continuing to respond individually to all queries and requests for information from veterans, which includes an Information Sheet (**Attachment A**)
- DVA will not resume the full program until these assurances are in place.

DATA

- The program uses de-identified DVA health billing records.
- If a veteran has never received a letter from the Veterans' MATES program, their identified data has never been accessed.
- Data is ONLY re-identified if a veteran is potentially at risk of a medicine related problem, so the University of South Australia can contact the veteran and veterans' doctor to suggest they meet to discuss the issue.
- All program data is maintained in a secure storage area (within Australia) for specific use by Veterans' MATES, with access restricted to security-cleared personnel only, in compliance with Commonwealth security requirements. These security protocols are audited every three months to ensure strict compliance.

OAIC

- On 26 April 2023 a decision by the OAIC was made relation to a privacy complaint by an individual in 2017.
- In this case, the individual withdrew their participation in the program and DVA did not fully implement this request.
- Because of its failure to adequately respond to that individual's request to withdraw from participation, the Department breached the veteran's privacy, and for this the Department has unequivocally apologised to that veteran and made a \$5,000 payment for non-economic loss (in-line with the determination).
- Importantly, the decision does not relate to all individuals involved with program.

BACKGROUND

- The Veterans' MATES Program has been successful in identifying real health care problems in the veteran community, for 18 years.
- Veterans' MATES has, in partnership with the University of South Australia, positively changed veteran medicine usage, and increased the uptake of complementary DVA funded health services, all to support veteran wellbeing and reduce adverse events.
- DVA takes privacy seriously and strict policies and contractual terms are in place to ensure the appropriate use and protection of veterans' personal information in accordance with the Privacy Act.
- A summary timeline of key dates is provided at [Attachment C](#).

REVIEW OF PROGRAM DELIVERY & DATA

REVIEWS

- Reviews are being undertaken related to the Veterans' MATES program:
 1. Independent Assurance and Compliance Review of program's opt-out arrangements.
 - Completed by Proximity, final report was received on 29 September 2023.
 - Overall, the review found DVA was fully compliant with all clients opting out of program participation (pre 31 July 2023) being fully actioned.
 2. Reviewing Privacy and opt-out messaging supporting the program consent model.

FACTS/FIGURES

- Since its inception, MATES has reached more than 300,000 veterans:
 - helped more than 67,500 veterans access necessary care; and
 - prevented over 1400 hospitalisations.
- Each year approximately 77,000 veterans receive health educational material from Veterans' MATES, specific to their health care needs.
- DVA has received more than 1,000 enquiries from clients covering one or more requests to:
 - opt out of program participation
 - seek information access requests for the data transferred (or through Freedom of Information (FOI))
 - lodge a privacy complaint

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- This is a significant increase on top of usual business, and capacity to manage within existing resources and with sufficient information specific to this issue, has meant some delay in responding to requests. DVA is now in a position to commence responding progressively to requests.

Attachments:

Attachment A – Information sheet (provided with letters to clients about opting out, access to information requests including FOI, and privacy complaints)

Attachment B – DVA statements

Attachment C – Summary timeline of key dates

Clearance

Date Created:	18 October 2023
Division & Branch:	Client Programs Program Delivery Division
Contact Officer:	Sarah Kennedy
Phone:	s 47F

Date Cleared:	18 October 2023
Division:	Program Delivery Division
Clearance Officer:	Leanne Cameron
Phone:	s 47F

Date	OAIC	Media/Comms
11 October 2017	Client makes first privacy complaint to DVA about use of his personal information in MATES	
3 October 2018	Client makes privacy complaint to OAIC	
28 February 2020	DVA submission to OAIC	
24 November 2022	OAIC preliminary view received.	
26 April 2023	OAIC final determination that DVA interfered with client's privacy following his revocation of his consent (in relation to one count of personal information about pharmacy use)	
29 April 2023	Client makes a second privacy complaint to DVA believing there to be more counts of breaching that the single count in the OAIC determination	
22 June 2023	OAIC Determination published	
10 August 2023		DVA Statement published on DVA and UniSA websites <i>DVA commits to reviewing program opt out and materials</i>
25 August 2023		Pause on weekly data feed to UniSA
29 August 2023		Revised Statement published on DVA website <i>Additional information about DVA temporarily pausing data to UniSA</i>
31 August 2023		Veterans' MATES article published in <i>Vetaffairs</i>
1 September 2023		E-news and DVA Hot Topics issued – reference to website statements – reference to Sec statement
28 September 2023	Review of opt – out arrangements finalised and final report received and accepted - 7 recommendations under consideration by Department	
29 September 2023		DVA Statement published on DVA Facebook page