What the Freedom of Information Act Means for the Hunterian

From January 1 2005, all publicly-funded bodies, such as the Scottish Executive, councils, quangos, Universities etc have an obligation to make information available to the public, unless there are compelling reasons why it needs to be withheld

Apart from personal data, almost everything else is considered to be in the public domain. There are other exceptions (eg personal safety, security, commercial, research in progress), but these will be interpreted in a very narrow way.

What about the Data Protection Act?

Personal information about living people must not be divulged without their written consent. Requests by individuals to see information we hold about them should always be referred to the University Data Protection Office.

So what difference does this make?

If somebody asks about **anything** in writing or by email, we have a legal obligation to make a reasonable response within 20 days. If you can't deal with it, make sure it is passed on to somebody who will. I would hope that this is little different to current practice for most of us. Much information is already available via the University (and Hunterian) FOI Publication Scheme: if information is deemed "published" under this, you can simply refer them to the website, and that's all you need to do.

Where is the Publication Scheme, and what's in it?

The general University scheme is at http://www.gla.ac.uk/foi/ . Specifically Hunterian information can also be found directly at: http://www.hunterian.gla.ac.uk/foi/ .

What about other information?

The FOI act requires that we make reasonable efforts to make information available. It specifically does not require us to carry out research on behalf of others. So it may be reasonable to say that, for example, a complex and time-consuming query about collections holdings cannot be answered in detail. However, you should ensure that any such response is (a) true, and (b) sent in a courteous and helpful manner within the 20-day limit.

What is information?

Almost everything we do using paper or computer will count as information which should be publicly available. This includes files on the server, and databases, as well as email, and paper files. We will be organising training seminars for all staff in the New Year to cover these issues in more detail. Meanwhile, there are "Handy Tips" links dealing with email, and files on the University FOI pages at http://www.gla.ac.uk/staff/foi/

Eh what?

If in doubt about anything, please contact John Faithfull on xt 4213, or, unavailable, the University FOI office on xt. 0659, or foi@gla.ac.uk