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Mr David Hawker MP
Chairman
The House of Representatives Standing Committee
On Economics Finance and Public Administration
Parliament House
Canberra ACT

Dear Mr Hawker

Inquiry into Tax File Numbers: Submission

The following information is furnished in response to your invitation for the New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages (the Registry) to make a submission to the inquiry being conducted into the Tax File Number (TFN) system.

For the past few years the Registry has been concerned at the increasing number of counterfeit birth certificates being used for fraudulent purposes. The sources reporting these instances to the Registry included financial institutions, state and federal law enforcement agencies as well as other state and federal government departments and authorities. To address the concern caused by the fraudulent use of birth certificates, about two years ago senior officers of the Registry commenced meeting with representatives of the affected organisations, including the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). The main purpose of these meetings was to discuss ways for birth certificates to maintain their effectiveness as a means of establishing a person's identity.

Arising from these meetings, the Registry, on behalf of the Registries in all other states and territories, set about devising a service to enable organisations to check the validity of birth certificates presented as proof of identity (POI) documents. The difficulty in maintaining a balance between protecting an individual's privacy while at the same time providing a service to minimise fraud in the public interest was resolved by the development of a Certificate Validation Service (CVS).

Briefly, the CVS provides for a user organisation to enter pre-determined particulars from a birth certificate presented by a client into the Registry's database via a secure Internet connection. The information to be matched in the model currently being demonstrated by the Registry comprises of a person's surname, given names, date of birth, year of registration and registration number. The only information that the Registry insists must be included in the information entered is the registration number; the reason being is that this is an identifier unique to a person's birth registration. Depending on the validity of the matching information entered, an immediate response is returned to the user organisation as to the validity or non-validity of the information on the document presented by the client.

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NSW ATTORNEY GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

It must be understood that this service does not provide for open access to the Registry's database. The service is of no value unless it is used in conjunction with a document purporting to be a birth certificate. This is because ALL information in ALL of the pre-determined fields must be an identical match in every character and space entered into the system. That is, the confidentiality of the records is maintained because there is no way the service can be used to "trawl" the Registry's database for unauthorised access to birth records of individuals. Privacy New South Wales has examined the CVS and has endorsed it as being of no threat to the privacy of individuals.

You might also be interested to know that the theme for the forthcoming Annual Australasian Registrars Conference to be held in Hobart between 10th and 12th November is "Fraud Minimisation". On the agenda for the conference is a session devoted to developing strategies for working in close co-operation with state and commonwealth agencies on matters relating to improving the integrity of birth certificates for use as POI documentation. An officer of the ATO who has been invited to present a paper on the matter at the conference will also address the subject.

While the above is an overview of the CVS, there are other strategies that are currently being developed by the Registry. Once again, this undertaking is on behalf of the Registries in all other states and territories. However, because of the sensitive nature of the proposals, they are still considered to be highly confidential and are not yet in the public domain; although there have been brief discussions with some peak commonwealth agencies including the ATO. If, however, your committee is interested in hearing more details regarding these strategies, I would be quite happy to appear before the committee and expand on the proposals.

Should you require any other information, you can contact me on telephone 9243 8541 or e-mail tstacey@agd.nsw.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

Trevor Stacey
Registrar
22 October 1999