

The Importance of Personal Data Protection in Clinical Practice

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Background

- The Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) and regulatory requirements enacted in 2014 have had important implications in healthcare, including the way healthcare workers practice. It also impacts medical education, research and quality improvement. The National University Hospital, Singapore is a multidisciplinary tertiary academic medical center with an approximate clinician strength of 1150. Clinicians need to maintain professionalism and protect the privacy and confidentiality of patients at all times.

Aim

- To ensure clinicians were trained in PDPA regulations related to their practice and ensure compliance.

Action Taken

- A Data Protection Office was set up to train the large numbers of clinicians and staff to ensure awareness, understanding and compliance.
- Policies and training were instituted to meet PDPA obligations.
- These policies were shared at various platforms such as hospital grand rounds, road shows and department level trainings.
- Critical emphasis was placed on keeping patient personal data secure and private.
- Exceptions and situations where patient data could be disclosed were shared, e.g. referring a patient to a step-down care facility or for long term care to a nursing home.
- Use of de-identified data was encouraged for education, research and quality assurance purposes, where feasible.
- An electronic module was recently launched to help busy clinicians train on their own time.
- After every segment was an online assessment for which a pass was required before proceeding to the next segment.
- Staff were issued encrypted data transfer devices to minimize any impact of data loss and/or theft.
- Management instituted a daily sweep of all common-use computer-desktops in clinics and wards to ensure complete removal of confidential data, if any.
- As an added precaution to prevent malware attacks and access to electronic systems, internet separation from all computers was instituted.

Results

- The enforcement of PDPA required a big change in clinician awareness, behavior and practice. This is especially importance in the interest of patient confidentiality, and will be an ongoing process with continued efforts being put in for sustainability.

