

Editorial

Protecting Patient confidentiality in the Era of Social Media

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Introduction

We live in an era where securing cases for elective procedures in the private sector is largely dependent on social media advertising. This involves posting success stories with pre and post-operative images of patients. Discretionary steps are often limited to black-out of the eye areas, which is often insufficient to hide the patient's identity. Moreover, doctors who have had the opportunity to operate on celebrities proudly exhibit their pictures on laptops to potential patients and even in classroom lectures for that extra marketing oomph. Photographic consent forms are unheard of in our country and patients are largely unaware how their data is being used and shared.

In the West, confidentiality is part of patient care, as data breaches can impact the holistic well-being and vulnerability of the patient. Cybercriminals infiltrating into plastic surgery records usually use them to mutilate the data or for intimidation and extortion. Data protection failure makes the organisation liable to face legal action and compensation.

Storing data in a safe place that is physically disconnected to non-confidential hospital records or creating backups that cannot be edited or altered are some of the solutions being examined to prevent a data violation in developed countries. Other processes including routers, switches and Firewalls are also being scrutinized to examine the data before deciding the appropriate location to store the type of data and block outbound packages containing sensitive information or from computers not permitted to access the hospital internal systems.

Web proxy servers to communicate through private emails of patients are being suggested. Hacked accounts are usually traced back to a security error by the surgeon

himself. All surgeons must be aware that data privacy is a core responsibility and part of a core competency of every surgeon and that legal implications are imminent in case of a data leak.

Data protection is a responsibility yet to be recognized and implemented in our country. Plastic surgery is one field where confidentiality is especially important.

No systems exist to protect patient confidentiality, which is an inherent right of the patient. Patient confidentiality in plastic surgery should be part of the plastic surgery curriculum. Serious consequences including loss of trust in the doctor-patient relationship and mental trauma can arise just by a slip of the tongue or revealing an image the patient has not consented to. Photographic consent forms that clearly state how patient data shall be used should be integrated into pre-operative consent forms including for research purposes and unnecessary disclosure without patient consent for personal gains should be discouraged among plastic surgeons.

Reference

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