

Digital Assistants Record First Privacy Breaches

Save to myBoK

Incidents Create Questions About the Emerging Tech's Use in Healthcare

Unquestionably, artificial intelligence (AI) is destined to revolutionize healthcare. It's also highly likely that in the near future, lawmakers in the United States will pursue legislation to strengthen privacy laws in the wake of data breaches and scandals that have rocked tech giants such as Google and Facebook. In the meantime, American healthcare and technology companies might want to take some cues from what Europeans have learned in the relatively brief length of time that the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has been in effect.

One proposed use of AI in healthcare has been the adoption of digital voice assistants—such as Apple's Siri, Amazon's Alexa, and Google's Home—in intensive care units, which a pilot program at Boston Children's Hospital has been testing.¹ Across the pond, Europeans have been taking advantage of the GDPR's ability to let tech and social media users request to review data that companies like Google and Facebook have collected on them. According to NPR, one user in Germany asked Amazon for his data through GDPR only to realize that what Amazon sent back was 1,700 audio recordings by Alexa that were generated by another person.²

"Suddenly, we found ourselves in the intimate sphere of strangers without their knowledge," the user told the German magazine c't.³

Using the recordings and public Twitter and Facebook data, the magazine was able to piece together the identities of the Alexa users whose data were sent to the wrong person. Similar cases have happened in the US—for example, an Oregon couple discovered their digital assistant device sent a conversation to the husband's employee, NPR reported. The incidents highlight the potential for privacy breaches of personal health information should use of this technology become widespread in healthcare.

As Katie McInnis, policy counsel for *Consumer Reports*, told NPR, "My concern as a result of what happened... is that a big corporation with sensitive information on individuals hasn't figured out how to keep those sensitive conversations very secure."

Clearly there is time for companies to work out the kinks before digital assistants become mainstream applications in healthcare. And hopefully hospital privacy officers will do their due diligence before patients are left saying, "Alexa, call my attorney."

Notes

1. AHIMA. "Alexa, Let's Schedule Some HIPAA Training." *Journal of AHIMA* 89, no. 9 (October 2018): 56. <http://bok.ahima.org/doc?oid=302598>.
2. Ingber, Sasha. "Amazon Customer Receives 1,700 Audio Files of a Stranger Who Used Alexa." NPR. December 20, 2018. www.npr.org/2018/12/20/678631013/amazon-customer-receives-1-700-audio-files-of-a-stranger-who-used-alexa.
3. Ibid.

Article citation:

AHIMA. "Digital Assistants Record First Privacy Breaches—Incidents Create Questions About the Emerging Tech's Use in Healthcare." *Journal of AHIMA* 90, no. 3 (March 2019): 52.

Driving the Power of Knowledge

Copyright 2022 by The American Health Information Management Association. All Rights Reserved.