

"Alexa, Let's Schedule Some HIPAA Training"

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When a new technology emerges, there's always a split between the early adopters and their more cautious counterparts. So when it comes to using a digital voice assistant like Amazon's Echo, Google Home, or Apple's Siri in a hospital's intensive care unit (ICU), doctors, understandably, are apprehensive. Especially since the devices [notoriously stumble](#) over mundane tasks, such as creating a shopping list.¹ But this hasn't kept some early adopter doctors from trying.

Officials at Boston Children's Hospital, who view the use of voice assistants as inevitable, are piloting use of one of these devices in three lower-stakes use cases to get physicians comfortable with the technology. So far they have used Amazon Echo's Alexa as a "surgical checklist providing surgery teams with step-by-step, procedure-specific guidance; a voice-conducted organ verification process for transplant teams that automatically documents responses in a medical record; and an application for ICU workers to quickly reference which practitioners are assigned to a specific bed," [Mobi Health News](#) reported.²

Pilot researchers found that if doctors encountered one negative interaction with Alexa, it was hard to win over their favor. Providers also had concerns about the privacy and security of sharing information with and through the devices (Alexa is not HIPAA-compliant), according to the article. But some involved in the pilot saw the potential for these devices to help with care.

"What to keep in mind, and what we've been doing since then, is actually walking our users through it the first time... because once you learn it once, it's really not that difficult and you can repeat the experience again," said Devin Nadar, partnerships manager at Boston Children's Hospital's Innovation and Digital Health Accelerator, at the recent Voice of Healthcare Summit at Harvard Medical School.³

Health information management professionals and informaticists can also contribute to the voice assistants' success in the field by being mindful of a documenting physician's workflow and keeping the devices from committing HIPAA violations. For example, one workaround in the Boston Children's pilot program included training the assistants to refer to patients by their room number instead of their names. This involves training the device to say the right thing and teaching users to ask the right questions of it.

Notes

1. Collins, Keith and Cade Metz. "Alexa vs. Siri vs. Google: Which Can Carry on a Conversation Best?" *New York Times*. August 17, 2018. www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/17/technology/alexa-siri-conversation.html?emc=edit_nn_20180817&nl=morning-briefing&nid=8669615420180817&te=1.
2. Muoio, Dave. "Boston Children's Hospital Investigating Alexa skills for doctors in the clinic." *Mobi Health News*. August 9, 2018. www.mobihealthnews.com/content/boston-children%E2%80%99s-hospital-investigating-alexa-skills-doctors-clinic.
3. Ibid.

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