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Data Storage and Redundancy - Loss of data due to Hardware Failure

Posted Oct 30 2008 3:22pm

"PENDLETON, Ore. (AP) — The crash of computer hard drives has vaporized thousands of digital X-ray files, and St. Anthony Hospital officials are busy providing patients with new X-ray information. The hospital has sent letters to 900 patients to tell them that a hard-drive failure by General Electric led to the loss of more than 5,000 archived images. General Electric provides the hospital's imaging equipment and stores its digital X-rays." Link: OregonLive.com: NewsFlash - Pendleton hospital loses X-rays.

It is not just small physician practices that are at risk of catastrophic data loss due to hardware failure. As you will note from this posting, hardware failures occur in large hospital systems. The loss of data resulted from the crash of computer hard drive(s) - plural. Even the best laid plans to ensure that data is recoverable are sometimes not sufficient. I am sure that there was a backup and redundancy plan in the Pendleton, Oregon hospital, however it failed. As a result, thousands of patients X-ray images were lost and somehow need to be recovered. Not only does this have health risks associated, the medico-legal issues are significant. It is no longer possible to measure the growth in the size of a tumour against the baseline X-ray because the baseline no longer exists.

This is similar to earthquake preparedness in terms of the response. When there is a major earthquake (especially in North America), thousands of people run out and purchase survival kits, ready action plans and ensure that they are prepared for impending disaster. Similarly, every time we learn of one of these incidents relating to hardware failure and loss of data, many make a conscious effort to upgrade hardware and develop backup and redundancy plans to ensure that data is recoverable in the event of a catastrophic failure. However, studies of physician offices running EMR systems have demonstrated that the vast majority are ill prepared to restore their patient information from a backup tape or disc if they are running their own server locally in the clinic. Even if regular daily backups are being done, few test (and retest) their ability to restore data to the system from one of these backups. Access to a remote database is clearly an advantage in this situation using an ASP EMR system. Someone else (an industrial strength provider) then has the responsibility to ensure that the data is backed up and is restorable in the event of a hardware failure.

Have you ever suffered from a hard drive failure or inability to restore data in your EMR? Share your experiences or lessons learned by clicking on the 'Comments' link below.

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