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Upgrading Your Technology with OfficeMate/ExamWRITER 15 is Essential for HIPAA Compliance

The unfortunate truth is that data breaches, ransomware, hackings, and cyberattacks are now commonplace. With rapidly increasing technology, it is far too easy for healthcare practices, including optometry and ophthalmology practices, to get attacked. In 2016, healthcare businesses inadvertently exposed more SSNs than any other industry either by error, negligence, malware, or hacking and the healthcare industry was the hardest hit by hacking, skimming, and phishing attacks.

Cyberattacks and internal data breaches can be avoided and prevented by implementing basic safeguards, such as limiting access to Protected Health Information (PHI) and keeping computers, servers, and software updated. An often overlooked compliance issue is updating computers and servers that are no longer running a supported operating system. For example, operating systems such as Microsoft Windows XP and servers such as Microsoft Windows Servers 2003 and 2005 are no longer supported, and thus do not receive updates for errors or new security protections.

Unfortunately, many eyecare providers are still unknowingly putting their practice and patients at risk by using Microsoft Windows XP and Microsoft Windows Servers 2003 and 2005. Microsoft stopped supporting Windows XP in 2014, Windows Servers 2003 in 2015, and Windows Servers 2005 in 2016, and so the last security updates on these systems were years ago. Running these systems leaves computers and servers more susceptible to ransomware, cyber attacks, and malware.

For OfficeMate/ExamWRITER users, it is essential that your business's operating systems are up to date. You can search for your operating system's lifecycle policy in the Microsoft Lifecycle Policy database. Even with an updated and improved version of OfficeMate/ExamWRITER, your server may still be at risk due to an old operating system and lack of security updates. If the internal security of your computers is compromised, any new programs are compromised as well.

While there is no HIPAA violation outlined for using unsupported operating systems, these devices are not considered HIPAA compliant, as the HIPAA Security Rule, 45 C.F.R. § 164.308 (a)(5)(ii)(B) states, "[...] organizations must implement procedures for detecting, guarding against, and reporting malicious software." Old operating systems lack the ability to update against malicious software and therefore they are no longer HIPAA compliant.

If your practice is still using these outdated operating systems, the best way to ensure HIPAA compliance is to document using the unsupported operating systems as a risk on your Security Risk Analysis, put a plan in place to upgrade your current operating systems to a supported version, move to a more reliable internet browser such as Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox, and have mandatory training for all employees. All employees should be trained on HIPAA compliance and should also be knowledgeable and educated on the new operating systems in use in your practice.

The complexities of HIPAA are one reason Eyefinity has partnered with Abyde. While it is expensive and time consuming to update software, computers, and similar programs, replacing these devices is incredibly important and critical for the HIPAA safety and compliance of your business. Inept and outdated technology can lead to not only more cyber attacks, such as phishing and hacking, but increased fines if you are audited by the Office for Civil Rights.

Protect your patients' information from hackers, start educating employees, and avoid failing a HIPAA audit. Ensure your technology systems are up to date now!