



Protecting against *DISASTER*

How you can protect your practice's vital information from being lost or destroyed

By Van Carlisle

The majority of modern dental practices already use at least one computer for bookkeeping and office management. The trend in dentistry matches that of the rest of the world — all information will soon be digitally stored and transferred. The advantages to a dental practice are many — intraoral cameras, digital radiography, imaging software, etc. However, there is risk involved.

This article will focus on one aspect of the digitization of the modern dental practice — the storage and protection of a practice's vital records.

Protecting and creating “backup copies” of a dental practice's vital records is a crucial practice-management issue for dentists. When the personal, privileged health

information of patients accumulates over the lifetime of a practice, the more records management and protection becomes a serious issue. When this is mismanaged, it not only threatens the livelihood of a practice, but also compromises the personal information of patients and possibly creates a HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996) violation. HIPAA regulations consist of a set of national standards that are designed to force dental practices — along with the rest of the health-care infrastructure — to comply with strong security and privacy standards to protect personal health information. Failure to comply with HIPAA can result in civil penalties (mainly fines) as well as, in rare cases, criminal penalties.

“Dentists’ fear of losing valuable records if they con-

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vert to an all-electronic patient record and billing system is unwarranted if certain precautions are taken," said Joseph E. Chasteen of the University of Washington's School of Dentistry. He offers the following advice: "First, they should perform at least a daily backup of the practice data so that no more than one day of business data would be lost during a catastrophic event. Second, they should secure the backup media so that it cannot be damaged or lost. It is interesting to note that these simple security strategies would not be practical if a dentist continues to use time-honored paper records and dental radiographs."

"I consider data backup and protection to be a vital necessity in the modern dental practice," agreed Dr. Lorne Lavine, one of the foremost experts in the field of technology today and a regular columnist for *Dental Economics*. "As more and more components of the practice's information are stored in a digital format, it is crucial to the dental office to ensure that this data is backed up and protected on a regular basis."

One universally understood measure to be taken is that all dental offices must carefully establish records protection policies and procedures. They must also document why they chose certain tactics and technologies to secure their vital records.

Some of the best practices for vital records protection include the incorporation of weekly, if not daily, backups

of records into the routine, as well as the procurement of fireproof safes and filing cabinets for on-site storage.

Many dental practices prefer to outsource the records-backup process to an outside service provider, which is fine up to a point. Unfortunately, this thinking can lead to disaster if something (fire, hurricane, flood, etc.) happens that causes damage and destruction to the practice.

Since most dental practices store their data on CDs (which hold 650 megabytes of data) or on removable Zip drives, consider using specially designed containers called "Media Vaults." These are small, portable fireproof containers used to store and protect the patient records (CDs, Zip disks, diskettes, microfiche, etc.) from the harmful effects of heat, humidity, dust, and magnetic fields. For the storage of the vital records that are onsite, even if that is only for a limited period of time, it is imperative to seek products that are tested by Underwriters' Laboratory (UL) or other nationally known independent testing labs. You should steer clear of equipment with manufacturers' or non-independent ratings. UL is the best, as no other testing and standards organization matches its reputation.

Simply stated, the need for dental practices to better manage vital records has increased dramatically over the past few years. It's time for you to figure out the best set of vital records protection solutions for your practice.

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