

Smart Hubs – OK in the Dental Office?

“Be very careful; they’re always listening”



Ever thought about installing a smart-hub like Alexa or Google Home in your office? Although it might be tempting to say “Alexa, let Doctor know we’re ready for her exam,” this is not the best decision for dental practices. Two primary concerns exist around the safety and privacy of patients as it relates to smart-hub devices.

The first concern is that smart-hubs are always listening. Smart-hub devices must be able to act quickly if their name is called “Hey Google, can you...” and in order to hear when someone calls its name, the device is always recording. By recording all sounds in the immediate vicinity, any Protected Health Information (PHI) that is verbally spoken would be recorded. While it is likely that companies like Amazon and Google delete unused recordings, there is virtually no way to verify this.

The other issue concerns the unpredictability of the devices’ responses. Anyone with similar names, like Alexa or Alex, or similar words can trigger the device to respond, leading to potentially inappropriate or embarrassing responses. While this may not seem like a big concern, any potential perception of inappropriateness on the part of patients should be considered a very serious problem. Ultimately, using a smart-hub device might seem like the next stage in our technological evolution, and perhaps it is, but until the devices are more secure, better at hearing their names, and/or Amazon is willing to sign a Business Associate Agreement (which is unlikely) with individual practices, having these devices in the practice is a greater risk than most practices should assume.