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The need to enforce legislation to ensure the protection of patient privacy has become increasing evident with the increase in cases of data theft in the healthcare sector. In fact, the finance and healthcare sectors have time and again recorded the highest rate of data breaches. The World Privacy Forum (WPF) released a report in 2006, which showed that approximately 3 percent of the identity thefts were related to the medical sector.

The medical and healthcare sector usually collects personal information regarding an individual's medical records, payment history, etc. Most of this information is sensitive in nature and adequate measures need to be taken to safeguard the information against identity and data theft.

Importance of Patient Privacy

The healthcare sector does recognize the importance of assuring patient privacy. All health care providers keep track of patients, usually through registration numbers. Any minor negligence in information sharing within and between hospitals would not only lead to data breaches, the consequent legal action would play havoc on the institution's reputation and business.

Awareness regarding data security and privacy of information has grown among the people with increasing instances of data theft being reported in the media. Over the past five years, over 34,000 cases of patient privacy violation have been registered in the United States alone. What is more worrying is that most cases that were investigated found that employees of the institution in question had leaked the information for personal gains.

The World Health Care Industry

Governments across the world have made privacy of patients' records an obligation for every private medical clinic, hospital and health insurance company.

In the USA, the **Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)**, enacted in 1996, includes stipulations for protecting the confidentiality of patients' medical records. According to this Act, patients have complete access to their medical information and the right to control the same. The legislation also allows patients to track medical practitioners auditing their medical records.

Similar laws have been put in place in most nations.

1. Canada enacted the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) in 2004.
2. The UK enacted the Data Protection Act in 1998.
3. The European Directive 95/46/EC (protection of personal data) is possibly the most stringent privacy protection legislation.



Cyber criminals are continuously inventing increasingly sophisticated ways to steal data and go undetected. A collaborative effort, backed by government support, is a much needed strategy to thwart data leakage and prevent confidential information from being stolen.



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