How important is your e-mail address?

By Duane Gallup MCSE— co-founder of Vital Technology Group

E-mail has become the easy and preferred way of communicating with patients, referring practitioners and vendors alike. Yet many practices give very little thought about e-mail and how it effects the overall perception of their business and professionalism.

Tell someone that your e-mail address is DrSmith@yahoo.com and often their first thought is that you have not committed yourself to your business. That obviously isn't the case, but it is the perception, and perception becomes reality.

Another issue to consider when choosing your e-mail is how would Health and Human Services (HHS) perceive your email in regards to HIPAA? Is it used to transmit or store "electronic Personal Health Information" (ePHI)?

When visiting with Dental offices about HIPAA issues, I'm often met with a response that their office is HIPAA compliant, because they take regular HIPAA CE courses and/or just went through a HIPPA review. Yet the e-mail they give me is often a free Yahoo, Hotmail or Gmail address. This is alarming because of poor perceptions and in order to be HIPAA compliant your e-mail must meet these three criteria:

1) E-mail must be secure.

2) E-mail must be encrypted if it contains any (ePHI), X-rays, or pictures.

3) Your office must have a Business Associate Agreement (BAA) in place from your e-mail hosting provider.

So while these free services <u>may</u> meet the first criteria for being secure (depending on your password complexity,) they don't offer encryption of e-mail, and they will not sign a BAA with you, or your practice. I'm sure this is an oversight with most offices, but one that should be addressed. Getting caught sending non-HIPAA compliant email comes with a terrible price.

When I push the issue, I often hear from office staff "we don't use our e-mail to send ePHI or communicate via e-mail about patients." Most often they tell me they fax or mail ePHI. Bzzzz.. wrong answer! Why? Because unless your fax is encrypted and/or on a "secured" line, then it too is likely to be captured by unauthorized individuals; just as an un-encrypted e-mail is. HIPAA regulations state that the most secure way to send ePHI is via encrypted email, not by fax. Further complications arise when your staff tries to work around not having encrypted email to send ePHI. In frustration, they often take shortcuts, putting your practice at risk.

Is this the policy in your office? If so, consider the last time that something wasn't where it was supposed to be, and your referring doctor has your patient in his/her chair, and needs the data ASAP. You know you got the data to him/her, now reflect on HOW you got it to him or her!
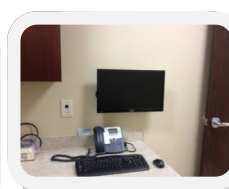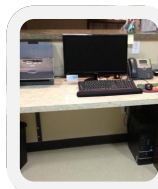
Obviously, there is a need for affordable e-mail service that is easy to setup and use, that is HIPAA compliant and gives your office a professional image. At Vital Technology Group we offer Solutions for as little as $13.00 a month per address. For offices that don't have a web domain we will host your address on ours so it would look something like dr@godigitaldds.net, or we can create a Domain for you. For Practices that already have their own web domains, we can host and encrypt all of your e-mail addresses using your website domain name, <u>even if another company is hosting your web site</u>. We take care of the setup and management of your e-mail and we will also sign a BAA.