

Abstract

Background: Healthcare domain consists of highly sensitive and confidential information governed by patient autonomy and privacy. Breach in confidentiality among healthcare professionals and patients will lead to substandard treatment and ultimately lower the quality of healthcare services. With the rapid advancements in the field of information technology, the digital transformation of healthcare is becoming inevitable. Apart from its vast benefits, digitalization also induces the risk of both intentional and unintentional healthcare data breaches. The entire concentration and effort of relevant authorities seem to be directed at controlling malicious intrusions, leaving unintentional healthcare data breaches a topic that is totally overlooked.

Objective: To determine the awareness of patient privacy in association with electronic medical records and potentially medically sensitive data among medical and nursing professionals in Sri Lanka.

Method: The study followed a descriptive cross-sectional approach. Data were collected using two separate self-administered questionnaires. A general questionnaire was given to 200 participants including medical and nursing officers, medical and nursing undergraduates attached to state healthcare institutions. A specific self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from 50 medical officers involved in health information management systems. Process observation and secondary data gathering provided an additional value.

Results: 43.5% of the participants admitted that their past actions have resulted in unintentional data breaches related to potentially medically sensitive data. 61.4% have witnessed such instances happening due to unintentional acts of their colleagues. 37.9% claimed they did not take any specific measures to protect patients' privacy while sharing patient data on digital platforms. 54.8% of the participants believed that unintentional healthcare data breaches should also get the same penalties as intentional breaches.

Conclusion: Healthcare professionals have an emerging and growing understanding of unintentional healthcare data breaches. Existing guidelines and policies in Sri Lanka do not expressly address the unintentional aspect of a data breach. Therefore, implementation of a national policy to address the issue of unintentional aspects of healthcare data breaches is a timely need.

Key words: Privacy, digital health, data breach, unintentional