


Vital Records Protection: SMALL- TO MEDIUM-SIZED DOCTORS' OFFICES

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– Melanie Dale, spokesperson for The American Health Information Management Association

Every category of business or governmental organizations has a number of certain documents and other items that are important enough to safeguard from all types of catastrophic disaster. Some industries make the decision to protect these documents, known in legal terms as “Vital Records” in hopes to have a smoother recovery in the event of a fire, flood or other disaster; other industries have the same intention, but are often required by law or regulation to provide adequate Vital Records Protection (VRP). Either way, storing Vital Records and documents in fireproof containers will save an organization not only precious information, but the time, money, and effort that would have gone into trying to reproduce destroyed documents.

The medical field is one of the industries that is subject to such requirements mentioned above, including (but not limited to) records protection guidelines set forth under the HIPAA, The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996. Documents such as patient records, employee information, and insurance documentation are some of the items that doctors’ offices should be protecting from disaster at all times. Some offices fulfill these requirements by sending the records to off-site locations with ample fireproof storage, while other medical offices use more cost-effective “in-house” record protection. Brenda Laws, Office Manager at E.H. Perez, MD in Asheville, North Carolina explains the situation in her office.

“Until we purchased our FireKing safe, we were storing our electronic medical records duplications at an outside storage company. That was turning into a hassle and becoming very expensive. The FireKing safe has not only saved us money, but it has also made getting access to our non-current files much easier and faster, allowing us to better help our patients in regards to their medical records.”

There are several different practical reasons why patient records should be stored in fireproof containers. Some of the most important uses of medical records include securing proper documentation of a doctor’s diagnosis and subsequent treatment of a patient’s health or disease, serving as a tool for further clinical research and quality care assessments, providing a defense in a possible future litigation, or addressing reimbursement issues with a third party such as an insurance company. Regardless of the reasons they are kept safe from fire, doctor’s offices of all sizes need to eliminate, as best as possible, the risk of permanently losing these types of records.

Julie Tremayne of the Cornerstone Family Medical Practice, located in Modesto, California, commented on using on-site fireproof record storage in a small doctor's office:

“Since we are a smaller practice, we only need to use one FireKing fireproof safe to house all of our back-up computer files. Our patient's medical records are first transferred onto the computer and then the disks are stored in the fireproof safe. Sometimes cash is held in the safe as well. Luckily, we decided to purchase this safe before any disaster has had the chance to destroy any important documents; hopefully nothing ever happens to put it to the test.”

The American Health Information Management Association is the organization created to assist the health care industry when it comes to gathering, managing, and storing medical records. Melanie Dale, spokesperson for the AHIMA commented on how all office or facility policies are formulated:

“A hospital, nursing home, or doctor's office will have rules and regulations regarding medical record retention imposed on them by the state in which they operate. The AHIMA only makes guidelines or recommendations, and then each state decides to fully accept, slightly alter, or completely disregard our guidelines for their own individual legislation. There is not a national standard in this area. In my opinion, all records that are retained should be housed in a fireproof container to ensure that the documents are fully protected from fire for the length of the required retention period.”

Specific medical record retention laws vary from state to state and change depending on the exact type of record. For example, a state might require that paperwork regarding the specific information surrounding a treatment given to a patient should be retained for ten years after the patient is discharged, or that same state could enforce an indefinite retention period for documents such as surgical records, birth certificates, or death certificates. Some medical facilities even go as far as to create blanket retention policies regarding all records or documents, not just medical records.

Since each state is responsible for creating regulations for medical record retention, there should be specific policies regarding exactly how these records are to be housed. Keeping important medical records anywhere other than a FireKing fireproof filing cabinet or safe is a huge risk that any medical office should not take. Until legislation is passed to require fireproof record storage in every state, it is up to each office to make the proper decision of fireproofing their record storage. Taking this proactive step to eliminate the risk of permanently losing medical records can prove to be a major time, effort, and money-saver in the end.