



HIPAA-COMPLIANT TEXT AND CONVERSATIONAL AI IN DENTISTRY

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INTRODUCTION

Dental practice and industry partners often demand quick and easy communication between providers, members of a care team, patients, labs, and suppliers. This communication is usually voicemail or typed messages that go through traditional texting or email applications. For busy dental professionals, convenient worry-free communication and optimized workflow are essential.



But texting patient data in a traditional and unprotected texting or email environment is hardly safe. This communication is vulnerable to interception and should be within a protected environment, one that preferably caters to the fast-paced world of dental practice.

There are already applications that allow dental providers, colleagues, and patients to communicate within a secure environment, but they lack the efficiency of texting, are tedious, and often do not support continued conversation and collaboration.

More importantly, they do not support or integrate with AI conversational platforms and virtual assistants, that answer dental care questions, deliver care reminders, send messages, capture and retrieve patient PHI data, schedule appointments, order automatically from suppliers, and perform

many other tasks through the power of voice and conversational interfaces.

The use cases for the integration of secure texting and virtual assistants on AI platforms are many in dental care. This machine learning translates to an improved workflow, improved outcomes, and automatic documentation.

The idea of a smart, always-available, hands-free, secure text and voice-powered virtual assistant in healthcare is hardly new, but as interest in virtual assistants gains steam in the dental industry, so has concern about data privacy and security. In a [survey published by Microsoft in April 2019](#), 41 percent of voice assistant users said they were concerned about privacy and security.

In this white paper we will first summarize the key components of HIPAA privacy protection and reference supporting systems, agreements, policies, frameworks, and methods that a secure texting and conversational AI platform uses to help its clinicians and partners comply with the law.

We will then describe best practices for creating secure text and voice applications with a conversational AI platform that go beyond the requirements of the law, and conclude with general implementation steps for creating secure texting and voice using a conversational AI platform.

IN THIS WHITE PAPER

- Overview of HIPAA supporting systems, agreements, policies, frameworks for a platform
- Best practices for secure text and voice
- Creating secure text and conversation AI

WHAT IS HIPAA?

Data breaches are, unfortunately, all too common, and their repercussions are very serious and expensive for the patients whose privacy has been compromised and the responsible provider or organization who must answer to the agencies that enforce the laws for data privacy and security.

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (“HIPAA”), and its subsequent extensions and modifications, are the set of U.S. laws that are designed to prevent breaches of Protected Health Information (“PHI”) handled by health insurance providers, healthcare providers, doctors, and hospitals (“Covered Entities”) or their third-party service providers (“Business Associates”). HIPAA is administered and regulated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office for Civil Rights (“OCR”).

PHI is any healthcare information, including medical and dental diagnoses, lab reports, vital data measurements, drug prescriptions, and more, that can be identified to an individual by what HIPAA refers to as “Identifiers.”

Identifiers that classify information as PHI:

- Names
- Full face photos
- Comparable images
- Patient partial image
- Unique marks

Identifiers include:

- Names
- Dates, except the year
- Telephone numbers
- Geographic data
- FAX numbers

- Social Security numbers
- Email addresses
- Medical record numbers
- Account numbers
- Health plan beneficiary numbers
- Certificate/license numbers
- Vehicle identifiers and serial numbers including license plates
- Web URLs
- Device identifiers and serial numbers
- Internet protocol addresses
- Full face photos and comparable images
- Patient partial images with unique identifiable marks or characteristics
- Biometric identifiers (i.e., retinal scan, fingerprints, voiceprints)
- Any unique identifying number or code

HIPAA law includes the Privacy Rule and Security Rule.

PHI

- Privacy Rules
- Security Rules

Privacy Rule

The HIPAA [Privacy Rule](#) (“Privacy Rule”) includes regulations to limit the use and disclosure of PHI. The Privacy Rule requires doctors to provide patients with an account of each entity to which healthcare providers disclose PHI for administrative purposes, while still allowing relevant health information to be used within the proper context and authorized channels.

Specific safeguards are required to be in place to protect PHI and there are set limits and conditions regarding the use and disclosure of data

without patient authorization. The Privacy Rule also gives patients the right to access their health information. The Privacy Rule applies to all PHI, including physical media and records, as well as electronic PHI (“ePHI”).

The Security Rule

The HIPAA [Security Rule](#) establishes national standards to protect PHI created, received, processed, or maintained by, or on behalf of, a covered entity. The Security Rule requires appropriate administrative, physical, and technical safeguards. These safeguards are based on the Security Rule requirements, risk assessments, and application of industry-standard security controls.

The Security Rule applies to health plans, healthcare clearinghouses, and to any healthcare provider who transmits health information in electronic form. Below are the various safeguards.

Awrel Safeguards

- Administrative
- Physical

Administrative Safeguards

The Administrative Safeguards establish the administrative processes and procedures for an organization’s HIPAA-compliance. They are broken down into standards:

- Security management process
- Assigned security responsibility
- Workforce security
- Information access management
- Security awareness and training

- Security incident procedures
- Contingency planning
- Evaluation
- Business associate contracts and other arrangements

Physical Safeguards

Business associates and covered entities must have physical safeguards and controls in place to protect PHI. These safeguards focus on the physical access to PHI through facilities, equipment, and other durable resources.

Safeguards

- Administrative
- Physical
- Technical

Technical Safeguards

Technical safeguards apply to the systems, operations, and staff required to ensure the protection of PHI.

Access Control

System activity must be traceable to a specific user. Access controls may include policies, procedures, and processes to support what access needs to be granted, controlled, and monitored.

Equally important is the control of access to update the policies, procedures, and process documentation to ensure that data integrity is maintained. Unauthorized viewing of the data on your computer is a real threat if a computer is ever lost, stolen, or inappropriately decommissioned. A great solution is encryption.

Access must be restricted via password to authorized employees. Servers and data storage units should be in a secured computer room with limited access. Data should be received and forwarded via automated, electronic processes where no direct human intervention is required. Access or viewing of ePHI should only be allowed when required.

A conversational AI platform should have policies and procedures in place for access control and monitoring to support user identification and tracking. The platform should be set up and configured with active vulnerability monitoring and response systems to protect for all data operations.

Individual Authentication Required

Audit Controls

Audit controls must be in place for hardware, software, services, and procedures that record and examine activity in information systems containing or using ePHI.

A conversational AI platform information security management program (ISMP) should have established internal audit procedures to review and monitor the assets, information, data, and user activities associated with ePHI.

Integrity

The Integrity standard requires a covered entity to implement policies and procedures that will protect PHI from improper alteration or destruction.

A conversational AI platform will probably be hosted on [Amazon Web Services](#) (AWS). To retain data integrity, a secure container model should be used with separate Virtual Privacy Clouds and Security Zones. Each conversational AI platform deployment includes development, staging, and production configurations that are separated to restrict access and further protect ePHI. Finally, all data on the conversational AI platform is fully encrypted both at rest and in transit using Advanced Encryption Standard (AES)-256, Transport Layer Security (TLS), and Hypertext Transfer Protocol Secure (HTTPS).

Person or Entity Authentication

A person's identity must be validated to confirm who they are.

A conversational AI application should employ a multi-factor authentication approach to ensure that the person is authenticated on two or more factors, including a one-time authentication with a passcode, token, and/or a pin code.

Transmission Security:

Covered entities are required to have effective protection of ePHI data-in-motion (data being transmitted electronically). Encryption must be used.

A good conversational AI platform should have a cryptography policy.

Tenets of the policy should include:

- Protection from ePHI being altered
- ePHI shall be rendered unusable if intercepted

- Encryption used for data at rest and data transmission
- Use of [symmetric and asymmetric keys](#) where applicable
- Use of non-proprietary, common FIPS-based supported cryptographic algorithms
- No decryption tools stored in the same area as encryption tools

Business Associate's Agreement

Dentist's often work with business associates. A [business associate](#) is an individual or entity that performs functions or activities that require access to PHI. Associates include entities like suppliers, labs, and other health systems.

HIPAA's Administrative Safeguards require a contract—Business Associates Agreement (BAA)—to be in place with third-party suppliers appropriate to their access, handling, or use of PHI. Assurances are needed from them to ensure that they understand HIPAA and how to safeguard PHI.

Sometimes a contract is not necessary. Exceptions include but are not limited to:

- Disclosures by a covered entity to a healthcare provider for treatment of an individual
- PHI collection and sharing by a health plan that is a public benefits program, such as Medicare

Awrel qualifies as a Business Associate In the HIPAA Parlane

Use PHI in a secure and established manner

- Disclosures to a health plan sponsor, by a group health plan, the health insurance issuer, or HMO that provides health insurance benefits or coverage for the group health plan
- With individuals or organizations that are a conduit for PHI, like the US Postal Service

It is necessary to ensure that these third-parties only use PHI in a [secure and established manner](#), to help the covered entity carry out its healthcare functions. Business associates must have safeguards in place since they can be held liable to similar repercussions as covered entities.

A conversational AI platform should have an established ISMP that addresses the administrative safeguards required of a business associate. The covered entity would enter into the platform levels of authorization of suppliers and vendors to establish their access to PHI.

The company that develops the conversational AI platform for the covered entity may also need to execute a BAA.

Text to Voice Requires Encryption

Encryption is Essential

It's important to emphasize that all traffic in the conversational AI platform should be encrypted using TLS 1.2 or greater. Web-based services, including interfaces for all end-user web-based applications, should use HTTPS to protect the transmission of data.

All communication between the texting and conversational AI platform and the covered entities' back-end system should be encrypted. Even

when on insecure networks, such as at an airport or coffee shop, no one should be able to access PHI. The platform should use industry-standard AES encryption for stored data.

Storage and servers should also be redundant so that if something fails, the practice can recover quickly. In case of disaster, data must be continuously backed up. Servers should reside in a physically secure data center, which is monitored 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The conversational AI platform should continuously identify and update security patches for all of the software used.

A Compliance Checklist

In summary, to comply with the HIPAA Privacy and Security Rules a conversational AI platform should implement the following:

Policies Procedures

- Encrypt all stored data with 256-bit AES in Cipher Block Chaining mode
- Encrypt all data as it is transmitted between computers and devices
- No PHI persisted on phone or client local system
- Email address verification
- Restrict access to PHI on a need-to-know basis (passwords and company policy)
- Restrict outside access to all servers and production workstations
- Automate data backups
- Store data backups in secured, safe, world-class data centers
- Automate virus checking

- Report any noncompliance
- Allow the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to audit
- Name a HIPAA Security Official to train staff
- Train all employees with access to PHI on company policies and procedures according to HIPAA mandates
- Relevant training must be required for all new hires and for all employees when changes are made to any systems or processes that would affect the performance of such controls—or when new risks are introduced.
- Require employees of the conversational AI platform to sign a confidentiality agreement

Best Practices Beyond HIPAA

Hopefully, it is clear now that a texting and conversational AI platform must have a HIPAA strategy that is cloud-based and built from the ground up with data privacy and security safeguards in place. But there are best practices that go beyond HIPAA. For added security, a texting and conversational AI platform should follow the best practices below for creating even more secure voice assistants.

Do you have an emergency?



Anonymized User Accounts

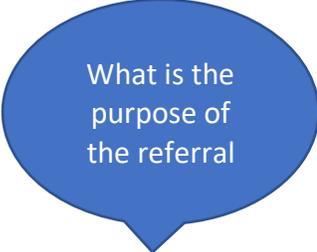
It's best to use anonymous accounts created and managed within the secure text and voice environment. With this approach, only a unique token is passed from the conversational AI platform to the texting and voice assistant (e.g., Amazon Alexa), and no identifying user account information or PHI is shared with the voice service.

Limit or Disable Voice Analytics

Like voice cards, it may be necessary to disable and/or limit the patient-specific information sent to analytics and reporting services. A conversational AI application should have a feature that narrows the analytics down to a specific voice intent.

Limiting PHI

Perhaps the most obvious and surest way to deliver patient privacy and data security is to eliminate the transmission of PHI altogether. Depending on the business need, there are very powerful and valuable voice and text applications that do not require PHI. For many dental healthcare organizations, this may be the best first step into the brave new world of texting and smart voice assistants.



What is the purpose of the referral

Account Linking Using a Secure Provider

Some skills require the ability to connect the identity of an Alexa end user with a user in another system, such as Twitter, Facebook, Amazon, and many others.

For example, suppose you own a web-based service “Bye Bye” that lets users order taxis. It would be very convenient for people to access Bye Bye process called [account linking](#), which provides a secure way for Alexa to connect with third-party systems that require authentication.

Account linking leverages [OAuth](#) 2.0—an open protocol that provides a simple, standards-based method for web, mobile, and desktop applications to request user authorization from remote servers.

Consider Context

While texting and voice technology might be secure from the standpoint of how data is protected once it is read or heard by the voice assistant, there are factors to consider that are outside the control of the technology itself. It is also important to consider the options that make the best sense for the type of information being collected, including the situation or context the person might be in.

For example, only common sense can prevent someone from saying sensitive information to a voice assistant in a crowded room. As a best practice, a form of a warning or notice provided at the start of the conversation or within the dialog can be used to prevent the user from sharing sensitive information.

Consider

- **voice**
- **chat**
- **touch**
- **screens**
- **buttons**

Application developers and user interface designers should consider the modalities available (voice, chat, touch screens, buttons, etc.) and the data that may be exchanged over these interfaces.

Virtual Assistant Cannot Access User Identity

When building a texting and conversational AI platform that will use voice applications like Alexa, there's a lot to think about when you're dealing with PHI. For example, when a patient makes an appointment through your website, they're interacting directly with your site — so protecting that information is relatively straightforward. The health system can wrap that conversation up in HIPAA security.

But with voice applications alone like Alexa, there's a middleman. The user can ask Alexa a question, and that information passes through Amazon on its way to the conversational AI platform. The same goes for Google Assistant and other voice-controlled platforms.

If you're worried about virtual assistants like Alexa accessing user identity, don't be. A conversational AI platform can secure text and voice in a way that ensures Amazon has no ability to correlate an Amazon account with the user account nor access to PHI secured within the conversational AI platform cloud.

Consider this use case. John Smith is an individual using an Amazon Echo at home to monitor and improve adherence to an experimental prescription drug he's taking as part of a clinical drug trial. The Amazon Echo device allows him to indicate when he's taken medication (e.g., Alexa, I've taken my 9 AM medication) as well as hear a report on his overall medication adherence.

Even though John Smith is using an Amazon Echo to provide information to the conversational AI platform through the voice assistant, Amazon has neither the ability to correlate a relationship between John Smith, Amazon, and the conversational AI platform; nor the ability to access any of John Smith's PHI stored securely within the conversational AI platform.

Conclusion

A texting and conversational AI platform for a dental practice needs to be HIPAA-compliant to securely communicate with referring dentists, labs,

Opportunities of Secure

- Voice
- Chat
- Text

and patients. The ideal platform will remove barriers so it can become the go-to tool for collaboration and clinical case management. Imagine integrated text and voice-assisted, guided data entry for ordering implants, supplies and equipment as well as integrated capabilities for intelligent conversational experiences with voice assistants such as Alexa and Google Assistant.



Amazon announced in 2019 that a version of their virtual assistant technology, Alexa, is HIPAA-eligible. This means that it's available for applications that are subject to the data privacy and security requirements of HIPAA and that Amazon is willing to consider executing a BAA with Alexa skill developers who want to create HIPAA-compliant skills. As of this writing (March 2020), the new HIPAA-eligible version of Alexa is available to a limited number of developers by invitation only from Amazon.

This opens up opportunities. More than [100 million Alexa-enabled devices](#) have been purchased to date. A dentist on a conversational AI platform could theoretically have the ability to access health information via a skill for Alexa, and provide more personalized and timely insights through voice – the most natural and convenient user interface in the home.

There is clear value in a text and conversational AI platform for dental practice and the dental industry, but it will be used at great risk if it is not within a secure system. The HIPAA Privacy Rule and Security Rule are the bare requirements. It is recommended that given the sensitive nature of

health data and changing policies with new technologies like voice AI, going beyond these HIPAA rules will serve you best.

If you're are considering a secure communication and voice assisted solution for your organization, contact Awrel, the dental industry leader in HIPAA compliant text and chat technology. www.awrel.com

ABOUT AWREL

The [AwrelConnect™](#), by [Awrel LLC](#), is dentistry's first free, HIPAA-compliant texting application using a hands-free voice assistant that is built on a conversational AI platform. Dentists and others can use the Awrel application to improve workflow by leveraging a virtual assistant which acts as a workflow template to do any number of tasks through the power of voice, conversational interfaces, and secure text.

Companies using Awrel Connect™ and Awrel Voice™ can private-label their offerings, define unique workflows, and create company and product-specific offerings.

Awrel was established to ensure that the dental industry utilizes technologies that bring affordable tools to industry for regulatory compliance, practice growth, profitability, improved patient outcomes and a heightened level of practice and business satisfaction.

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