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Improving the health of your communications



White Paper

Missed doctors and nurses appointments are costing the NHS millions in wasted time and resources. According to a recent survey¹ by health education charity Developing Patient Partnerships (DPP), over eleven million doctor's appointments and around five million nurse appointments are missed in the UK each year.

Aside from having a major impact on primary care targets, this also wastes valuable GP time and practice budget and increases the waiting time for other patients.

A key reason for the level of Did Not Attend (DNAs) is due to a lack of communication between patients and their practice. While patients have responsibility to keep or cancel appointments, doctor's surgeries and medical centres can do much more to improve communications and reduce the number of DNAs.

A number of advances in technology mean that it is now easier and more cost effective than ever to create a telecoms system which can dramatically reduce the DNAs for your practice. These systems create flexible hours for patients to contact the surgery; automate processes to reduce the administrative burden on reception staff and provide proactive patient outreach.

One of the first steps is to manage both incoming and outbound calls as efficiently and effectively as possible.

One of the most common reasons for patients failing to update their appointment status is because the surgery number was busy, and they forgot to try again. The first step in improving communications is to try and eliminate busy/engaged signals, or holding callers in queues. Ideally, patients calls need to be 'routed' through to the right person without having to go through a receptionist or operator.

Efficient routing of inbound calls is absolutely essential, and a fundamental requirement of any system you consider.

Two basic telecoms features can quickly achieve improved call routing. Firstly, individual Direct Dial-In (DDI) allows you to direct patients to the correct person or facility. There could, for example, be specific numbers for repeat prescriptions or to book or cancel appointments. There may be occasions when you need to hand out a DDI that allows the patient to get through in the case of an emergency, or out of hours.

¹DPP: Developing Patient Partnerships; see www.dpp.org.uk for full survey.

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DDI's can also be used to route patients to an income generating number to help cover administration costs. There are regulations in place regarding the use of inflated rate telephone numbers, but a good solution provider will know these and be able to provide advice and guidance on what is, and what is not, acceptable. However, it is worth noting that Ofcom has already banned the use of 0870 numbers for doctor's surgeries, and it is possible that other revenue generating numbers may suffer the same fate.

Secondly, Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and Automated Attendant (AA) features mean surgeries can route calls to offer patients instant access to key services when all other lines are busy, or at any time day or night. This is where efficient messaging or voice-mail comes into play.

The minimum requirement is a voicemail solution that allows receptionists, individual departments or practice personnel to collect messages outside of busy periods, helping them manage their workload. Setting up individual secure voicemail systems for each doctor, with mailboxes that they can access out of hours or when they are away from the surgery is a good way of helping employees manage their workload.

Automated solutions also allow the practice to go even further, automating appointment management completely, allowing patients to book, cancel or amend appointments around the clock, or access vital information such as test results while they wait on line, all without human intervention.

Further efficiencies can be made to patient handling by integrating the telephone system with back office applications which hold patients contact details and medical history. When a patient calls in, their medical history can be quickly accessed and updated.

Finally, solutions such as Patient Partner from Toshiba's Business Communications Division today mean that surgeries can change their communications from reactive to proactive without putting any strain on existing resources, and in a way that suits most people—via their mobile phone. The system can send patients an SMS text message 24 hours before an appointment, reminding the patient to confirm, cancel or change the time. The appointment schedule can be automatically updated using their response.

So, who do you choose to help implement these technologies? Selecting the right technology partner is essential. This is a long term investment and the relationship needs to work. The solution provider needs to have robust and reliable technology which offers maximum investment protection.

The system should also be able to handle all the basic call functions of today's technology, and seamlessly integrate the more advanced features of IP telephony as and when they are appropriate, to ensure your surgery can continue to improve the health of your communications.

In Practice — Case Study

Opened in October 2004, The Village Medical Centre is a new practice which employs twenty staff including one full time and one part time GP, plus a nurse practitioner. The practice decided it was appropriate to investigate how technology could be used to offer its patients the flexibility and choice that a 24 hour booking system could provide, and implemented the Voice Connect Patient Partner system, available from Toshiba.

Andrew Peedle, IT Manager at The Village Medical Centre explains, "The system has given our patients choice, which historically has never been available in the NHS. They can now book, cancel or move appointments 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We have not yet received a bad comment about the system and we aim to keep it that way."

The positive response from patients has also given the staff greater assurance when using the system. "The complimentary feedback has given me the confidence to promote the system to other patients," explains Pauline Yates, one of the Patient Support Team.

Overall, the staff at The Village Medical Centre feel that Patient Partner has been a great boon to patients and staff, even after the short time it has been in use.

"We particularly like the flexibility and choice that the system offers our patients, coupled with its SMS text messaging service. Patient Partner has harmoniously integrated into the way we envisaged our practice to be. We believe that this new technology enables us to deliver on our commitment to our patients—that of choice and service", concludes Peedle.

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