

Handy Tips on...



Emails with Patients

Email consultations can be a useful way of providing an alternative point of access for patients. Patients can use email for a number of “routine” requests such as repeat prescribing requests or information queries.

1. Trial the system first using just one GP, and a few patients and test the change.
2. Make it very clear to patients that it is not appropriate to use email for urgent matters.
3. You may wish to begin the use of email contact with patients by using emails for repeat prescribing requests, information requests, drug queries (“I have just read the leaflet...”) or certificate requests.
4. It is advisable that all emails to patients are encrypted. Encryption software is available through your Internet Service Provider.
5. Consider obtaining a patient’s written informed consent for the use of emails. Patients should be informed of issues such as:
 - ◆ how emails are dealt with in the practice i.e. who apart from the clinician may see the email if they are handled by a member of the administration team;
 - ◆ confidentiality issues. You may wish to include a clause at the end of email, such as: *“This e-mail and any files transmitted with it are confidential and intended solely for the use of the individual to whom they are addressed. If you have received this e-mail in error please notify the sender.”*;
 - ◆ that emails will be included in the clinical records.
6. Read the prior work on the subject. AMIA (American Internet Medical Association) has developed guidelines on the use of emails with patients. This can be found at the following URL: http://www.amia.org/pubs/other/email_guidelines.html
Another useful point of reference is: <http://www.swis.net/midgley/2000gp01.htm>
7. Establish a system for handling emails, including a turnaround time. You may wish to consider having one member of staff who is responsible for receiving all emails and who then passes them on to the appropriate person.
8. You should consider configuring an automatic reply to acknowledge receipt of messages. The acknowledgement message should include when the message will be dealt with and remind patients that if their request requires a more urgent response, that they should contact the practice directly.
9. It is important to request that patients use an auto-reply to acknowledge your emails to them. These messages from patients should then be checked by the practice to ensure that all emails have been received.
10. Record the consultation in the clinical records.
11. Use the Web. Many email requests may be for general advice or information. It may be useful to direct patients to a “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQs) page on your practice website.
12. It is useful to include a footer on emails which informs patients how to communicate with the practice more directly (i.e. telephone numbers of the practice or out of hours services).

With thanks to:

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