

The Tech Doctor: No More No-Shows

It's easier than you think

By Rosemarie Nelson

You know that each no-show patient per day creates a gap in your schedule, and you may be among those physicians who breathe a sigh of relief when a few extra minutes are freed up during a busy day. You have an unexpected break during which you can return phone messages, attack that pile of test results on your desk, or just take some time for yourself.

But you also know the impact that no-shows can have on your bottom line. Like some physicians, you may think that such patients are simply inconsiderate, but in today's fast-paced world it's easy for the most conscientious of patients to forget a trip to the doctor's office scheduled long ago. So how can you help your patients keep their scheduled appointments and help your practice run more efficiently?

Technology to the rescue

Automated telephone reminder systems have been around for several years and have proven to be an easy-to-use, effective technology with a rapid return on investment. They require no special interface, which means no tacked-on fees after they're purchased. In general, the bigger players in this field operate by using an output file from your practice management system — your daily schedule report.

If your staff is personally making appointment reminder calls, you may find that this task typically gets pushed back until the end of the day, and it may not always get done. An automated reminder system can be programmed to call patients at whatever time of day you wish, freeing your staff to spend more time attending to the daily needs of patients and providers. Such automated systems also document the results of each reminder call, giving you extra liability protection within the patient-care arena. Most systems generate a report that tags each call with a date-time stamped result, informing you if the patient was reached, if the phone went unanswered, or if the message was picked up by voice mail. Your patients will grow accustomed to receiving reminder calls and even rely on them to help them stay on schedule themselves.

Many practices believe that automated reminder calls are impersonal, and that requiring staff to make such calls adds a "personal touch." But have you ever really listened to your staff make those calls? It's not a particularly fulfilling or challenging task, so it often falls to the least experienced or newest staff member. Without proper phone etiquette training and an understanding of the marketing impact of even their tone of voice, your staff's "personalized" reminder calls may in fact work against you. An automated reminder system can project a positive image of your practice by delivering a consistent, professional message to your patients and some even allow you to record the prompt in your own voice.

And remember, you can customize the same software that generates reminder calls to communicate with your patients in their preferred medium, such as e-mail or text messaging.

And many such tools offer much more than simple reminder calls: They can recall your patients when it's time to schedule a follow-up or an annual exam. They can alert patients to overdue balances or make them aware that their test results are in. They can even extend birthday greetings. The word will quickly spread that yours is truly a patient-focused practice.

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