

TECHNOLOGY

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Medical Information Technology

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Your Cell Phone:

A Gateway To Go High Tech?

By **Bernd Wollschlaeger, M.D., FFAFP, FASAM**

I frequently receive calls and e-mails from fellow doctors questioning the financial benefits of health information technology solutions in their practices. The most common concern relates to expenses in hard- and software, staff training and necessary workflow transition, which demands significant upfront expenditures in time and money. By answering those questions I always point out that incremental changes, utilization of existing technology tools and careful implementation planning can mitigate the growing pains of necessary practice adjustments and realignments. We forget that we already utilize high-tech communication devices in our daily life but do not maximize their potential use.

Most of us own cell phones, which are highly sophisticated miniature computers and multimedia devices with amazing connectivity features. I have learned that doctors hardly ever consider their cell phone as a tool to ease and improve their workflow but instead only place phone calls. Several key features should merit your attention and suit small practices as well as large integrated delivery systems. The number ONE tool you should use is text – messaging. We continue to debate the pros and cons of e-mail as a patient management tool. Meanwhile, our patients have moved ahead at break neck speed and demand almost real-time access and communication with their doctors. Text messaging, or SMS (Short Message Service) is an easy and convenient way of allowing patients to keep in touch because so many people have cell phones with text-messaging capabilities. Among the many opportunities, SMS is an effective and viable option to send appointment reminders, notify patients that their lab results are ready for review and proactively alert patients about chronic disease management issues and about pending routine screening exams.

According to a consensus opinion of various experts, practices should first determine what the system will be used for, which will help make the decision on which system to buy easier. Next, the practice should draft the outgoing messages that will be sent and have them cleared by the practice's attorney for possible HIPAA security rule violations. Finally, patients need to be given the option of whether to use the communication mode and how to opt-out. Remember, not everyone appreciates the opportunity to have to respond to a text message, especially NOT when you are driving

home. Several experts claim that on average, practices can reduce staff time from one hour, per doctor, per day to less than 10 minutes by using text-messaging systems for appointment reminders, lab calls and follow-ups. The savings, plus increased revenue by filling saved time with additional patient visits, could boost the bottom line by as much as \$100,000 per year. There are several web-based text messaging options available. Most are free to set up, with users billed a set fee for the month, generally in the \$200 range.

Also available are physician-specific systems that can mine data from a practice management or electronic medical records system, which means the messaging is all done automatically. You can start the process today by collecting cell phone numbers of your patients for the databases to be populated with cell numbers.

But there are additional potential applications you can use your phone for.

According to a recent article on the Apple web site <http://www.apple.com/iphone/enterprise/doylestown.html> some hospitals use Apples iPhone 3G to connect with their staff physicians. The iPhone interfaces with the hospitals electronic health record, or other digital databases, therefore providing doctors access to patient information (labs, imaging studies, vital signs etc.), support clinical decision making using medical reference applications, and breaking news health alerts can assist the physicians to provide collaborative and efficient patient care. These tools transform the cell phone into a multi-function, indispensable device that provides real-time information to physicians.

There are many more potential applications and I look forward to your input on our blog at: <http://miamimedblog.blogspot.com> or send us a twit at <http://twitter.com/dadedoc>.

I am looking forward to your comments and suggestions.

Disclosure: *The author is a practicing family physician, addiction specialist and computer consultant. In addition, he is a founder and managing partner of a medical IT company.*