



Practice Web Sites Change How Doctors Communicate With Patients

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Family physicians around the country are discovering that the Internet is a useful and inexpensive way to communicate with their patients. Many are using the mydoctor.ca practice Web site tool that was recently introduced on cma.ca by the Canadian Medical Association. mydoctor.ca helps physicians set up and launch a Web site in 30-45 minutes, even if they have no programming experience.

Many doctors have found very innovative ways to use their sites. Some give out information that is asked frequently, such as when flu shots will start, or what is not covered by the provincial health plan. Having this information available online reduces telephone traffic and decreases the frustration that patients experience when they must either listen to a busy signal or spend time on hold.

Basic information, such as when the office is open, can be very helpful to patients, and some family physicians have made particularly good use of this capability. One physician who works in two different locations has indicated on his Web site when he is at each location so that patients will show up at the correct place for their appointments. Another physician, who has a family practice but also works in a walk-in clinic, uses his site to explain how patients should book time with him: he will see them at the walk-in clinic for urgent problems, but they should schedule appointments during regular office hours for routine matters.

Another useful piece of basic information is whether a physician is taking new patients. My office receives 15-20 calls per day from patients looking for a doctor. Each call takes on average one minute to deal with. Placing this type of information on a practice Web site might not stop all of the calls, but it can certainly reduce the time staff spend answering the telephone.

Telling patients when a physician will be away can also reduce telephone traffic. One rural physician has a statement on his site indicating that he works overnight in the ER on certain nights, and the next day he will not be in the office. Another physician does

international relief work and is out of the office one or two months each year; he uses his site to tell patients why he is away, when he will be gone, and who will be covering for him during the absence.

We have seen several examples of sites being used to advise patients that the office is hosting locums, students or residents. This is a valuable way to decrease the “surprise factor” when patients come to the office and find that either their doctor is away, or that they are going to be seen by a trainee. If they don’t want to be seen by anyone except their primary provider, they can make the appropriate arrangements in advance.

Helping patients get ready for an office visit can streamline the flow once they arrive. Patients can never be reminded enough times to bring all of their medications, so Web sites are being used to reinforce this message. Some physicians use their sites to tell patients what will happen when they are in the office for a procedure. Another even tells patients why there might be a male in the waiting room of her women’s health practice – she explains on her site that she shares the waiting room with another physician, and that patients are welcome to book appointments when she will be the only doctor in the office, if they would feel more comfortable.

Giving patients online access to forms that they need to fill out can speed up the flow once they arrive at the office. Several Web sites highlight the form the CMPA likes to have signed when a physician sees a patient who lives in another province or country.

Downloadable brochures are also easy to deliver using mydoctor.ca. Several Civil Aviation Medical Examiners have an information sheet that tells pilots what they need to do to prepare for this third-party exam. Anecdotal data suggests that this simple use of the Web can eliminate as much as 20 minutes of work by the office staff for each examination.

Physicians who do other types of third-party work have used their sites to tell patients what the services will cost, what they need to do to prepare, and what follow-

up will be required. One physician, who has a practice limited to insurance examinations in patients' homes, uses the site to explain all aspects of the examination, testing, payment by the insurance company, and how to contact him. In this case, the practice Web site has allowed the physician to run a low-cost virtual office.

The mydoctor.ca Web site tool also helps physicians build a set of links to provide health information to patients. Physicians have the option of selecting a set of general or local links that have been reviewed and approved by a CMA librarian, or of putting up links that they have found themselves. It is also possible to post documents that patients can download. Information sheets, such as disease-specific handouts, can be easily placed on the site using the mydoctor.ca Wizard.

The tool offers an extensive reporting capability to examine the performance of a site. It is very easy to generate a report over any time period that will show how often any page or custom document on the site has been viewed. In my case, it showed that patients liked having access to the BC Cancer Agency's handout on prostate cancer screening, but they were not looking at my health links very often. This feedback suggests that I should remind patients about this part of the Web site when they are in the office.

Physicians are using their sites in innovative ways to decrease the telephone traffic, enhance the office's productivity, and improve patient satisfaction. To see examples of these Web sites, go to www.monmedecin.ca and select family medicine under "specialty." ●

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