How can the simple text cut costs?

High-volume hospitals often encounter problems in booking and managing patient appointments. Take North Florida Women's Care in Tallahassee, for example. With a growing list of patients and approximately 50,000 encounters a year, the practice struggled with keeping up with appointment management and responding to patients in a timely manner – i.e., usually patients had to wait 20 minutes or more when calling.

The deployment of a patient engagement system about a year ago helped change things for the better. The patient engagement tech means the practice is now able to use text messaging to simplify scheduling, cancellations and rescheduling.

"Our old system had some nice features to it, but when an appointment was cancelled by the patient, we had to manually start making call-downs to find a replacement," said Bill Hambsh, CEO and practising administrator of North Florida Women's Care.

As the mobile text messaging technology is integrated with the practice's electronic health record, cancellations now automatically are detected on the clinic's calendar and proactively filled with the next patient on the waitlist. Moreover, hospital administrators can send reminders one week in advance of an appointment, then two days prior, and finally two hours before patients' scheduled visits.

"Patients prefer communicating with us via text message and now they can easily cancel or reschedule an appointment by simply responding to one of these texts," Hambsh said. "Ninety percent of our patient population is under 65 years of age, so being able to reach them on their phones is huge."

In addition, physicians now use texting to guide patients with clinical information and ensure a better visit. For example, the clinic now can prepare patients for different procedures, such as an ultrasound, by tapping into the appointment categorisation in the EHR and automatically generate a reminder message in advance of the visit.

"It helps avoid any lags in our clinic schedule, which means we can see patients on time and, more important, our patients avoid having to come in for a second visit simply because they might have forgotten to come in with a full bladder for an image scan," Hambsh said.

Further, the clinic's referral coordinators now immediately can engage with a referred patient. Whenever a referral from another doctor is received – fax, call, mail, etc. – the clinic can input the patient information into its digital referral system and activate a text message "to make it as easy as possible for the patient to respond and see the referred physician," Hambsh explained. With the new integration, the clinic can track how many referrals come from each doctor and generate reports that help staff better analyse and align resources, he added.

Since replacing patient call-downs with the automatic waitlist feature to immediately fill cancellations, physicians have been able to see nearly 100 more patients a month who responded to open wait list offers. In monetary terms that equals about an additional $10,000 in revenue per month, at minimum. The clinic also has cut no-shows by half.

"Similarly, by automating referral outreach and prompting patients to self-schedule via call or text, our physicians have been able to see more than 1,100 referred patients, which is approximately a 25 percent increase," Hambsh said.

Everyone has mobile phones and everyone texts, so taking advantage of that with patients can make a world of difference to help a clinic better serve patients' health, he concluded.

Source: [Healthcare IT News](#)
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