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Pediatric Practice Pointers: An Effective E-Mail Policy for your Practice

Electronic communication is becoming a widely accepted method of communication between patients and their physicians. E-mail fits nicely in with a pediatric practice. Parents of your patients escape the annoyance of being put on hold or becoming lost in an automated telephone system. Telephone messages often get lost or overlooked in the activity of a busy practice, something that can be avoided with an e-mail message on a computer screen. On the physician end, the interruptions associated with telephone calls and electronic pages can be avoided. E-mail provides instant documentation for the patient's record, and allows retention of the advice given out during the visit. A stressed parent with a sick child might have forgotten to ask important questions or did not fully understand your directions. Pediatrics is perhaps the most "question-oriented" specialty. A follow-up e-mail can remedy the situation quickly and without any major hassles. In two income families, both parents typically have access to computers both at home and at the workplace. Given this level of ease, using the computer to contact the doctor's office is almost second nature.

E-mail can also be useful for routine tasks and to streamline practice operations. Prescription refills and lab results can be easily requested, and appointment reminders can be quickly sent out. Routine follow-up questions and insurance inquiries can be answered without a disruption to anyone's schedule. E-mail also provides patients/parents with an easy way to report health measurements from home, such as glucose readings. Medical advice and treatment instructions can be reinforced when educational materials are included as an attachment to a message. This can be used as a way to show how your practice is different and that it cares about parent/patient education. Put the message out that you welcome e-mails about your patients. However, be careful to spell out what can and cannot be written in e-mails.

However, with all of the benefits provided by e-mail to both patients and pediatricians, a code of conduct is becoming increasingly necessary for health care providers. This policy must be incorporated into your practice's personnel manual, and all staff members should be given a paper copy. The policy should also be made available in electronic form on your internal website. Parents of your patients should also be given a copy of your policy, along with specific rules and guidelines that they need to follow for the policy to be effective. If you are going to encourage use of e-mail in your practice, you must be sure that your patients/parents understand how it will be used. As much as possible you need to sure that your families understand how it will (and will not) be used.

Your practice's e-mail policy will need to address communication issues, as well as those related to technical elements. A sound policy will have these questions answered:

- Who will be responsible for printing messages and placing them in patient charts?
- Who will triage e-mail messages, and what is the established response time?
- Will each physician have his or her own account, or will there be separate accounts set up for billing questions, scheduling, and clinical inquiries?
- Should all parents be given the e-mail address, or should it be given out selectively at the discretion of the physician?
- Are sensitive topics permitted to be discussed, such as HIV?
- What kind of encryption software will be used?

- Will the effectiveness of e-mail communication be evaluated for patient satisfaction and clinical outcomes?

It is important to discuss with parents the turn-around time for e-mail responses. Emphasize that e-mail should not be used for emergencies. Ask parents to put in the subject of the message filtering categories, such as prescription, appointment, medical question, or billing. Let parents know your privacy guidelines and who will have access to the messages they send. It is also important to inform them that a paper copy of all e-mail correspondence will be placed in the patient's file. Ask parents to sign a release form before conducting any health care-related discussions electronically. This release may be incorporated into your new patient information sheet, as well as in any updates you have parents or guardians sign. Have information in your reception area about e-mail communication and also put information in your newsletters.

Be aware of the etiquette that you must also follow if you choose to communicate via e-mail to parents of patients. Do not include angry or sarcastic remarks in your messages. One advantage of using e-mail over telephone communication is that it allows words to be carefully chosen. Make sure your message is not too casual, yet it need not be very formal or in "medical lingo". Be specific about the orders you want to be followed, and if you need a response, give the recipient a deadline to do so by. In order to ensure that your message will be understood and not ignored by the parent, make sure they know whom it is from and what it is generally about. At the end of the message, include your contact information. Your name and title, the name of your practice, address, and telephone number, and your website address should all be attached to the end of the message. You might also want to include prepare a quick statement instructing the recipient to call if an immediate reply is needed.

Chances are your practice has e-mail access, but are you taking full advantage of all it can do for your practice? So much of the activity going on in your practice could be managed more efficiently by using e-mail as a patient/parent communication tool. A better rapport can be established with parents as well through electronic correspondence, when used alongside more traditional methods. In order for an e-mail program to work smoothly though, you need make sure you have set ground rules, both internally with your staff and externally with your patients and their parents.

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