

"The practice feels that overall it now operates more efficiently and that the standard of patient care has improved by the move to information management." Practice Manager.

Practice Profile

- Based in a capital city
- Six full-time GPs and one part time GP, practice manager, three part-time nursing staff and six part-time receptionists
- Nine computers, with one on each doctors' desk
- Sees around 900 patients a week
- Has access to e-mail and the Internet via a dedicated phone line
- Uses clinical practice management software

This practice developed its information management capacity over a nine-month period, with a \$40,000 investment in hardware, software, furniture and other associated equipment. Since its initial investment the practice has begun to realise cost savings on in-house pre-printed letterheads and files, and the use of continuous paper-feed dot matrix printers. Also, transferring patient data into electronic records has reduced the internal and external file storage costs and staff have been freed-up from paper-based manual work and redeployed into other areas. While reluctant to define actual monetary savings at this point the practice believes that in all areas their work is carried out more effectively, efficiently and to a much higher standard.

The practice has moved toward storing all records electronically to aid accessing information and ultimately improving patient care. Patients' records are stored electronically making them easier to retrieve and also eliminating the difficulties that can arise over deciphering handwriting and layout.

Computer System Used For

- Scripts
- Referrals
- Receiving pathology and radiology results
- Completing Health Assessments and Care Plans
- Medication Records
- Patient Recalls and Reminders
- Clinical Audits
- Practice Management

Within the records referrals, scripts and some test results, such as pathology and radiology, are stored electronically on a database allowing for easy referencing, monitoring and access to patient test results.

The practice says electronic records have the advantage of allowing quick manipulation of data to identify potential candidates for clinical trials and audits and monitoring of issues such as chronic disease management and cervical screening. This has also resulted in the stored information being much more accurate.

The practice feels this better quality record keeping will lend itself to long-term business savings in terms of better time management. The effect of this more effective information management within the administrative side of the practice applies equally to the clinical side of the practice, says the practice manager.

As well as using electronic patient records during consultations, the doctors use electronic clinical support software to aid in diagnosis and treatment of diseases. To complement the decision-support software the doctors access the Internet to locate authoritative information regarding medication or

treatment regimes mentioned to them by patients who have researched a particular disease or condition on the Internet.

The doctors feel patients benefit from the wealth of health information available electronically, because at the click of a button there is access to thousands of relevant health and ancillary service providers, whose details are then merged immediately into the referral correspondence.

With electronic records the practice says patient recall reminders and personal information is now fully computerised, which means it has greater control over items like Pap smear recalls. As well as routine recalls, the practice says the system means it can respond to potential disease outbreaks such as measles, by notifying parents with children who are identified as being at risk, in the database.

In the future the practice says the database will assist in identifying and recalling patients with chronic diseases – asthma, diabetes, osteoporosis, mental health, hypertension and cardiovascular disease, which will promote quality health outcomes for the patient.

On the administration of the practice, practice software is used for private billing and maintaining business accounts. Both the billing and accounts are contained within the information management structure and are stored electronically, while incoming paper documents and letters are scanned into a flexible electronic format and stored in a secure environment. The practice also uses Internet banking and tracks debts through the practice software.

With the tight time-frame for the implementation of computerisation, comprehensive communication was undertaken within the practice to smooth the introduction of the new technology. All staff members were initially consulted and written statements of expectations and goals were drawn up. A forum for critical feedback was also established and continuous consultations and periodic meetings were arranged, which included both question and answer and problem solving sessions.

This helped address staff fears and resistance to change over concerns involving the ability to adapt to new technology and the perceived threat to jobs with the introduction of Information Management.

Education and training was provided to suit the different levels of ability amongst staff, and a practice manual documenting the Information Management process was drawn up and is maintained and updated to meet the changing needs of the staff.

The practice feels the introduction of the information management system has had the added bonus of improving staff morale because administration staff have been freed from manual paper-based tasks and have been able to develop and broaden their skills in IT and Information Management. The flow on effect of this is that the staff will be happier and more highly skilled workers with a lower staff turnover.

While the maintenance of the system requires ongoing attention the practice believes that the longer term benefits of the system will be increasingly realised as the use of information management continues to improve efficiency.