

"You have got a greater fool-proof system than a paper-based system. I cannot see how a paper system can work more effectively, I talk to other practices and often compare notes, what we have seems to definitely make life easier." Practice Manager

Practice Profile

- Based in a rural town with a population of less than 25,000
- One full-time GP, one full-time practice manager and a part-time staff member
- Two computers, with one the doctor's desk
- Sees around 100 patients a week depending on appointment times
- Has access to e-mail and the Internet via a dedicated phone line

With the purchase of a practice in October 1995 this doctor realised that Information Management and Technology would ultimately become an essential part of General Practice so decided to integrate IM/IT into the practice from day one.

With an initial outlay of \$10,000 on computer hardware and software the practice incorporated Information Management into both its clinical and administration sides. Since then, costs of maintaining the system have been ongoing, with the computer system being updated a year ago.

The benefits of establishing the system have "far outweighed" the costs of introducing the IT systems and Information Management

processes, says the practice manager.

Within the practice the computer system is used for "everything" says the practice manager. "We had our accreditation visit last year, and the AGPAL accreditor couldn't believe how much we utilise the clinical software within the practice."

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

Patient records are stored electronically, with all relevant correspondence, including pathology reports and radiology reports, sent to the practice via e-mail placed into the patient's file.

The practice does have in place an agreement with some specialists to exchange a patient's progress notes, via a secure e-mail link. Letters and progress notes from other specialists received by post are scanned into the system and attached to the patient's electronic medical record.

"While the establishment of the e-mail connection to the specialists took time, with many not wanting to use it, those who do use it find that it's [sending patient reports via e-mail] a great system," the practice manager says.

During a consultation the doctor accesses the patient's record directly from the computer on their desk, with new notes added on to the record, as well as prescriptions and requests made by the patient for pathology tests or radiology images. Any results or correspondence received about the patient prior to the consultation are sitting within their electronic record for the doctor to see.

With a dedicated phone line used for the Internet, the doctor uses the Internet during consultations with the patient to provide a visual explanation about a condition to back-up their advice.

The doctor uses the clinical software for diagnosis and treatment support, with the software automatically picking up any potential for adverse drug reactions with a patient's existing medications, when a new script is entered into the system.

At the end of a consultation, if required, the doctor will print off information about a diagnosed condition, or prescribed treatment, for the patient to take away with them from the surgery.

"Providing the hard copy of such information is very much appreciated by the patients, because often they forget what they were told in the surgery," says the practice manager.

Outside of the consulting room the computer system is used to generate patient recalls and reminders. The practice manager says the system makes it easy to generate names and contact details when reminding patients of the need for things such as Pap smears and vaccination requirements. A practical example of how this facility is used is when it comes to reminding elderly patients of the need for a flu vaccine in the lead up to winter, or when the Hepatitis B vaccine is required for 10-year-olds. In both cases the system's database generated the necessary details to contact all the patients concerned.

As well as being used for general recalls, the system is also used to remind specific patients that they have not completed a required pathology test or specialist visit. The system's database has been used twice for research activity with it producing data for a requested antibiotic audit and for taking part in asthma research.

On the administration side of the practice patient bookings, payments, establishing practice demographics and the practice's financial management are all done within the practice management software.

"It is very easy using the computers for all the day to day things. Making and changing patient bookings, taking Medicare payments, reminding patients of outstanding payments or Medicare cheques are all automatically done. It saves us a lot of time," says the practice manager. A link to the Internet means it is easy to communicate with other practices, and bodies such as the ADGP or Australian Childhood Immunisation Register.

The practice manager says without the information management systems in place the practice would not function anywhere as efficiently as it does at the moment.

"As far as I can see a paper-based system cannot be as efficient as a computerised system. It is easy to use, everything I want and the doctor wants is there in front of us without having to hunt for it; it [the computer system] definitely allows us to work more effectively."