

"It is very efficient, and that efficiency definitely makes it (IM/IT) a time saver for the practice. Once the practice became familiar with the systems it became very easy to use for everybody involved."

Practice Manager

Practice Profile

- Based in a rural town with a population of less than 25,000
- Four full-time GPs, two part-time GPs, and six administration staff
- Ten computers, with one on each doctor's desk
- Sees around 500 patients a week
- Has access to e-mail and the Internet via a dedicated phone line

Information technology has been used by this practice since 1991 to manage its Information Management systems. Initially this was used to manage the administration side of the practice, and in 1997 a decision was made to integrate IT to the clinical side of the practice, with the introduction of desktop personal computers and prescribing software into each doctor's consulting room.

Funding for the IT system came from the practice, although the funds received through the range of Practice Incentive Program payments are now contributing towards system upgrades. A recent upgrade means the practice now pays

\$600 a month to lease the necessary hardware to manage the system.

Much of the drive to develop the electronic system has come from one GP in the practice who had a strong interest in technology and Information Management, says the practice manager. "Staff motivation has made it so much easier to develop our systems." That drive has meant the computerised system has "snowballed" in terms of its development since it was first introduced, and it has now grown to the point where IM/IT is used in every aspect of the day-to-day management of the practice.

Computer System Used For

- Scripts
- Referrals
- Receiving pathology results
- Completing Health Assessments and Care Plans
- Medication Records
- Patient Recalls and Reminders
- Scanning of progress notes from specialists into the system
- Practice Management

Like most practices that use technology to assist in the management of clinical data, patient records are stored electronically, a fact that is a great time saver for both the doctors and the practice staff, says the practice manager.

"There is no need for practice staff to be called on to dig out paper records; the doctor has instant access to the record from the computer on their surgery desk."

Within the patient record, all pathology and radiology results, which are received electronically, are stored directly into the patient file with the click of a button. Notes from specialists that are received by mail are scanned into the system and attached to the patient's record.

During consultations the doctors use the available clinical software to support diagnosis and treatment decisions. The clinical software automatically picks up any adverse drug reactions with existing medication when a new script is entered into the system. The doctor's notes are added directly into the patient's electronic record during the consultation.

The practice feels one of the biggest benefits of introducing clinical software is that it can be used to identify patients for recalls and reminders. In this case the database is used to generate patient names for such things as immunisation and Pap smear reminders. Once the patient is identified, the practice either sends a letter to the patient concerned, or makes a phone call to the patient as a reminder, says the practice manager.

The database has been used for research purposes on two occasions, with the practice taking part in a mental health and antibiotic audits using the patient information from their database. Information on the system is saved to a data cartridge as a precautionary back-up move, with a back-up copy being made daily by the practice.

When it comes to the administration of the practice, IM/IT systems are essential for its day-to-day management, says the practice manager. Patient bookings, patient payments, the staff payroll and the practice's accounts are all done on the computer system. An important function of the administration software for the practice is the fact it automatically identifies those patients who have not presented their Medicare cheque after 60 days, prompting the practice to send out a reminder letter to the patient encouraging them to present the payment.

Staff have found using the practice management software easy, says the practice manager. "Basically the staff have learnt to use the system through on the job training, as new aspects were introduced to it, they were taught how to work with them". As a result, the practice manager says the savings in time for staff have been great, and instead of being left to chase up either clinical or administrative paper records, they now have more time to deal with patients, and other aspects of the management of the practice.

Without the information management system in place the practice manager says that managing the practice would definitely be a much more complicated task. "For those practices that haven't got an established IM/IT system and in place, or are not introducing one, I would say they are at a disadvantage, particularly with the way technology is developing and what is becoming available to use within the practice. While it takes time, planning and resources to introduce a system from scratch, I think it would definitely be worth it for the efficiency of the practice."