The Use of Text Messaging to Reduce Non-Attendance at Outpatients Clinic – a Departmental Experience

Abstract:

Sir,

Non-attendance at outpatient clinics is a common occurrence and impacts significantly on the efficiency of clinical departments. High rates of non-attendance result in under utilisation of medical, nursing and administrative resources and are estimated to cost the United Kingdom National Health Service about £20-£65 per incident impact on already overstretched clinic waiting lists. More than half of patients who miss their appointment cite forgetting their appointment or confusion about dates or times as the reason for non-attendance being reported to reduce non-attendance rates, including reminder letters, personalised or automated phone calls, all with varying degrees of success. There are few reports on the use of text messaging as a reminder tool. Mobile phone usage in Ireland is the highest in Europe per head population, with a recent survey by the Irish Commission for Communications Regulation reporting over 5 million registered mobile phones in Ireland.

In an effort to reduce the outpatient clinics non-attendance rate, the Urology department in conjunction with the Information and Communication Technology department commenced the use of a text message reminder, sent to patients three days prior to each patients appointment. We audited non-attendance rates at Urology clinics before and after introduction of this service. The short messaging service (SMS) system was sourced free of charge from XIAM Technologies Ltd. and each text message incurred a cost of £0.07. 25,820 outpatient appointments were issued in the two years before introduction of this service and 27,604 appointments were issued in the two years thereafter. Non-attendance rates were compared between the two time periods using a two-tailed t-test. The non-attendance rate in the two years prior to text message reminders was 17.6% (4,544 patients). Following the introduction of text message reminders, the overall non-attendance rate declined to 12.4% (3423 patients), a reduction of 29.5% (p<0.02). The greatest improvement, a reduction in non-attendance rate of 63%, was seen in patients between 16-30 years.

There was an absolute reduction in non-attendance of greater than 1000 patients over the two years attending our department alone. Hogan et al conducted a telephone survey of clinic non-attendees and determined that a text message reminder would have encouraged 51% to have either attended or contacted the hospital to cancel use of text message reminders results in substantial improvement in the utilisation of clinical and administrative resources, with considerable cost-saving to the overstretched health system.

P Ellanti, RP Manecksha, R Flynn
Department of Urology, Adelaide Meath Hospital, Tallaght, Dublin 24
Email: robert.flynn@amnch.ie

References