

## **When does online patient messaging make sense?**

*I had an elderly patient with problems after his retina surgery who was so tired of playing phone tag that he finally asked me, "Can't I just email you?"*

*I agreed, and it really helped with communication. He was so thankful for the service.*

– Rhondi Meiusi, MD, Ophthalmologist at Edina Eye Clinic, PA

Are you a physician who is tired of playing phone tag with a patient? Are you looking for an easy way to put educational materials in your patients' hands in a traceable, documented fashion?

Secure messaging offers an easy way to become more efficient in your communication while having it documented at the same time.

### **Becoming More Efficient**

Online secure messaging is an increasingly popular way for physicians and patients to communicate. The beauty of online communication is that it does not require both parties to be free at the same time. Instead, just as with email, each party can communicate when convenient to him or her. This is called asynchronous communication. Today, while a phone call between a patient and physician often requires several attempts on the part of both parties, asynchronous communication ensures delivery of a successful message each time. In addition, unlike phone conversations, secure messaging documents communication for both parties.

*"...when you eliminate phone messages you become more efficient because you have a patient transcribing her own message instead of paying a nurse to transcribe it and send it."*

-Grace Report, October 2006

There are times when secure messaging will not work, and when *synchronous* dialog is needed. When you know your communication will require clarifications and giving the patient the opportunity to ask questions, an office visit or phone call will be needed.

### **Are my patients ready for this?**

While 74% of patients want to be able to communicate online with their doctor (HarrisInteractive, September 2006), you need to find out if your patient population is online. For online patient communication, at least 50% of a clinic's patient population should have internet access from home or work. The following internet usage information should help in making this decision, but if you are unsure about your patient population, a simple 3 question survey may suffice to get a quick sense of online access.

- 73% of all Americans use the internet (Pew Research Foundation, 2006)
- 84% of 30-49 year olds have internet access (Generations Online, 2006)
- 71% of 50-64 year olds have internet access (Generations Online, 2006)
- 32% of over 65 have internet access. (Generations Online, 2006)
- 53% of adults living in households with less than \$30,000 go online (Pew Research Foundation, 2006)

*"I love the ability to use web messaging to communicate with my patients. It's much easier than using the telephone, and it has improved communication between my patients and me."*

- Maria Arias, MD, OBGYN at Atlanta Women's Specialists

The Pew Research Foundation's July 16, 2003 article *Health searches and email have become more commonplace, but there is room for improvement in searches and overall Internet access* sums the benefits of secure messaging up nicely:

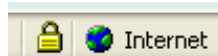
- Secure messaging spans geographic distance. It helps shorten the miles between doctors and patients: patients are sometimes separated from their doctors, particularly specialists, by great distances. One respondent wrote, "The neurologist I most respect and trust practices about 1500 miles from where I live...but when I have questions about therapy or have an important medical decision to make, I discuss it with him via email."
- Secure messaging facilitates ongoing, non-urgent communication. Online communication takes real-time constraints out of non-critical doctor-patient communications. Wrote one: "My local doc wants me to email him with updates on how a new treatment is working or with questions. I find this to be a convenient way to communicate. We don't end up playing phone tag; I don't have to keep calling back, wondering if he ever got the first message. Usually, I get a response within a day or so." Another echoed, "My neurologist invites his patients to communicate with him via email. I do this when I have the need and he responds within the day or hour, depending on severity of situation."

!!!--Note that in the above that while patients may use the word "email", email and secure messaging are not the same. **Email is not a secure form of communication.**

## Keeping it Secure

The following check list should help you assess if your existing online communication is secure.

- When patients access your website and are entering their message to you, does the URL start with <https://> or do you see the following padlock in the lower right corner of the page?



If not, the communication is not encrypted, and therefore not HIPAA compliant.

- Are you sending email to or receiving email from your patients using normal email software?

If so, you are not using HIPAA secure communication. Email travels across multiple internet and mail servers and is readable to all of them. You do not control the path it takes. If your email account is shared with others inside the clinic or if the patient's account is shared with others at home or work, the communication is not secure can its contents are visible to all who have access to the email account.

- Do you have a way to determine which employees have accessed a particular patient's information?

HIPAA Security Rules require that you have an audit trail of all staff access to patient personal health information. You need to know who has accessed or viewed your messages.

- Do you know how you would access the information if there ever were a power outage or interruption in your internet communication?

This, too, is required by the HIPAA Security Rules.

## How should I implement and promote secure messaging?

The best way to implement secure messaging is first by agreeing with your partners on a set of office policies for secure messaging.

- What are the terms a patient should agree to when they initiate communication?
- What response time should you offer patients?
- How will you be notified that there is a message? What process will you use to ensure that messages are regularly checked?
- What will you do when you are out, sick, or on vacation? Who will cover for you?
- When and how should patients be offered and informed of this service?

When you have done this, look for a tool that supports your policies, is HIPAA secure, and is easy to use for you and your patients.

- When a patient communicates with you, they should be able to easily review the terms you are setting for communication and see how soon they can expect a response from you.
- Patients may need help in the communication process – make sure you have some form of online help available to the patient.

## Business Case

- Greater efficiency in physician-patient communication.
- Documented patient communication.
- Patient convenience.

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