

Patient-Doctor Online Communication: Not All E-mail is Created Equal

By Kelly McDonald

“Just shoot me an e-mail.” Fifteen years ago, the phrase might have caused people to pause. Now, communicating by e-mail is woven into the fabric of everyday life for everyone from school-kids to senior citizens.

But there is one exception: When patients try to communicate with their physicians via e-mail. According to recent studies, only 10% to 25% of physicians use e-mail to communicate with patients, despite the fact that most consumers want to interact with their medical providers electronically.

When doctors at our practice, Nephrology Associates of Northern Illinois, a 60-physician medical group with multiple office locations, however, started to oblige their patients by using their consumer e-mail accounts (i.e. Hotmail, Yahoo, AOL) to communicate, I cringed. Although I saw the value of such communication, I realized that these e-mail services just did not provide the level of privacy, security and control needed in the health care setting.

I found our nephrology group stuck in a common conundrum. On the one hand, some of our patients were asking for e-mail communications and many of our doctors and staff members recognized the value of online interaction with patients. On the flip side, however, I, along with other administrative and information technology types at the practice, recognized that beyond the benefits sat a host of potential privacy and security risks.

The problem? Providing an appropriate online communication system for patients to use with doctors is not as easy as it looks. While it's a snap to use commercial e-mail accounts for all kinds of personal and business purposes, using e-mail for health care communications is much trickier.

The upshot? Medical group practice managers and information technology professionals need to step in and find online communications options that can meet the needs of their doctors and

patients. By simply ignoring the issue, doctors and patients are apt to be left to their own devices—and that means they might attempt to use common commercial e-mail accounts to communicate, thereby subjecting the medical practice to privacy and security risks.

A look at how the use of e-mail has evolved in our Oak Park, Ill.-based medical group illustrates why Nephrology Associates of Northern Illinois had to go beyond garden variety e-mail programs and adopt a specialized Web-based communications system to provide a suitable online patient-doctor communications alternative.

E-mail evolution

At Nephrology Associates, we have been using e-mail for many years but until recently we did not have what it takes to meet the privacy, security and workflow requirements that go hand-in-hand with patient-doctor online communication.

Because we have multiple offices and staff members spread across Illinois, we began using e-mail more than seven years ago in an effort to coordinate communication across our organization. To enable staff members to communicate with one another via e-mail, our information technology department provided employees with e-mail accounts that operated on a secure virtual private network (VPN) and were protected by numerous firewalls. By using a VPN, we were able to take advantage of the connectivity of the Internet—while maintaining security and privacy through the encryption of the data as well as the originating and receiving network addresses.

This e-mail communication option works fine for all of the practice's administrative and support staff. But physicians have different needs. Because e-mail accounts can only be accessed on computers with IP addresses recognized by our practice's IT department, physicians have absolutely no interest in using these accounts because they can not utilize the e-mail at home or in the hospital setting.

To solve this problem, we recently installed a secure, Citrix Web site, which is designed to facilitate safe access to e-mail from any location. This option is enabling physicians to have access to the practice's e-mail accounts from multiple locations including home and hospital computers as well as from mobile devices such as cell phones and personal digital assistants.

Such online communication works well for a myriad of office related communications: Who is covering on the weekend? What's the phone

number to the new pharmacy down the street? Who wants pepperoni and who wants sausage on their pizza at Friday's lunch?

Patient problem

Secure as it is, however, this Citrix-based e-mail option still is not quite right for patient communications. Why not? While the system would work fine for routine communications (i.e. appointment requests, billing questions), imagine what could happen if a patient submitted the following e-mail message:

"Dr. Smith – I would like to get a refill on my prescription. I ran out a couple of days ago and I am now experiencing heaviness in my chest."

If the e-mail languished in somebody's e-mail box for days—or even hours—the consequences for the patient and practice could be dire. Indeed, failing to immediately respond to an urgent clinical message like this, of course, could jeopardize a patient's health and could put the practice at risk from a malpractice perspective.

As such, we knew that we needed to have an online system in place that would record each message and then route each message to the appropriate person in an acceptable time frame—which, in clinically urgent cases, means immediately.

After searching for an option, I eventually discovered NeedMyDoctor, a Web-based application that enables secure, structured messaging while also recording and controlling all incoming communications.

Here's how it works: Patients simply go to our practice's Web site and click on an online communication link. An encrypted, secure, formatted e-mail is then sent over the Internet and received by an operator at our answering service.

The call center then routes the message to physicians via pager, phone, fax, or e-mail, depending on the nature of the message and office-approved protocols. The patient receives an immediate electronic response, telling them their message was received, the action that is being taken, and the time frame in which they will receive a response.

With this system in place, the practice is able to securely offer patients what they want: online communication with their physicians.

But perhaps most important, the system overcomes the following obstacles that had previously prohibited us from offering patient-doctor e-mail communications:

Security. Built with the most advanced technologies, the system provides the security and privacy needed to transmit personal health information over the Internet.

Ability to respond to urgent messages. All incoming messages are screened and immediately routed according to existing protocols. If an urgent message comes in, then, the on-call physician would be immediately paged—thus eliminating the worry that a time-sensitive clinical issue might not be attended to.

Physician workflow. The system makes it possible for physicians to continue communicating with patients as they had in the past. Because all messages are forwarded to doctors according to pre-established protocols, individual physicians never even have to use e-mail to participate. They can get all of their messages and respond just as if the messages came in over the phone. Plus, because the system uses standardized forms that guide the patients to query about certain subjects (i.e. prescription refills, appointments, etc.), physicians are not likely to receive e-mails with superfluous queries.

Documentation. NeedMyDoctor records all incoming messages and produces written documentation that illustrates exactly how each message was handled. Such information helps to comply with HIPAA regulations and also can help protect the practice from medical malpractice claims.

The NeedMyDoctor system does not only make it possible to offer patients an online communication option, it also is providing some unexpected—yet welcome—benefits such as improved:

Customer service. Because patients receive an immediate response telling them what action is being taken, they are likely to be happy with our outgoing communications. For example, previously if a patient had called in for a prescription refill, the patient might call back every four or five hours to find out when the prescription would be refilled. With NMD, however, the patient immediately knows that the prescription will be refilled in 24 hours—and, as a result, no longer looks for more information.

Marketing. As we look to expand our practice, providing an online

communications option makes it easy for potential patients to contact our practice and initiate a relationship.

Office workflow. The asynchronous nature of e-mail communication enables us to use the system to improve workflow. When patients phone us with questions, we often have to run around to find the chart before we can answer them. This reduces service levels to other patients/callers/providers. With requests coming in online, we can research the question before calling patients back. This cuts down on the phone tag and helps us provide more meaningful and effective communication.

Streamlined communication to physicians. Because the system screens all incoming messages, physicians are never bothered with questions that could be answered by other staff members (i.e. billing inquiries). Also, because the system tells patients when to expect a response, physicians do not receive numerous follow-up calls, thereby freeing up their time to concentrate more fully on clinical patient needs.

Physician recruitment. The need for nephrologists is growing at a quick clip. By offering services such as NeedMyDoctor, we can show doctors who might be considering our practice that we offer top-notch customer service to our patients backed by the tools and resources needed to run an effective practice.

Kelly McDonald is the director of development and marketing at Nephrology Associates of Northern Illinois, Oak Park, Illinois.