



# Managing No-Show Patients

## The missing patient

When patients do not cancel an appointment which is no longer required, forget their appointment or simply do not arrive, it can leave a gap in the doctor's schedule. This in turn can lead to the practice and doctor losing potential revenue.

Every practice, at some time, has to contend with the 'no-show' or the 'did not arrive' (DNA) patient, but what are your obligations to make contact with a missing patient?

## Your duty of care to the no-show patient

A patient's non-attendance or cancellation of a scheduled review may be for a number of innocent reasons; however there remains a duty of care to ensure the patient is obtaining the necessary clinical follow-up.

When a patient does not present for a scheduled appointment, or leaves before being seen by medical staff, the practice should telephone the patient or care-giver to ascertain why they did not arrive or left early. The conversation and any outcomes should be recorded and the general practitioner informed so a decision about any further action can be made. For example, if the general practitioner has concerns about the patient's condition or needs to discuss some results, a recall may be initiated.

If you are unable to contact the patient by telephone, a letter should be sent to the patient and a copy of the letter kept on the patient's file. If the condition is serious, the letter should be sent to the patient by registered post so that the patient has to sign to accept the letter. If initiated,

Australia Post can also notify the sender (the practice) once the letter has been delivered.

## Strategies for seamless appointments

To maintain goodwill between patients and the practice, consider adopting strategies for improving clinical systems and improving patient attendance.

Allocate a staff member to take responsibility for initiating a reminder system. This can be done with a telephone call to the patient, usually the day before the appointment. These days many practice software packages provide text or email reminders. Check with your patients what their preferred method is and incorporate the question into the patient questionnaire. You may like to start with specialised or surgical appointments requiring longer appointment times.

The following strategies could also be implemented to improve attendance:

- Do not overbook your schedule. Patients see long wait times as a sign of disrespect, which in turn can cause future no-shows.
- Keep an allocation of appointment slots at a range of times for urgent cases as they present on the day.
- Schedule an 'on call' doctor for the day, with less booked patients so that he/she can accommodate walk-ins or urgent cases.
- Train practice staff to triage appropriately. Reception staff, or if available, the practice nurse should be delegated the task of determining the urgency of 'fit-ins'. The protocol should clearly state what complaints/symptoms described by the patient are immediately referred to the general

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practitioner or practice nurse and when staff are expected to call for an ambulance.

- Take into account your patient's obligations. Start by asking patients when they would like to attend, rather than assigning the first available slot.
- For patient convenience, look into the possibility of patients being able to book online or through a mobile app.
- Write future appointments on an appointment card and give it to the patient. Magnetised cards are handy for the fridge, and will keep the appointment prominent.
- Where patients are delayed at the practice waiting for their appointment, remember to keep them informed, check on them, offer refreshment, or suggest they come back later if the doctor has been called to an emergency.
- Maintain timely patient access. No-show rates increase when the patient has to wait a long time from scheduling the appointment to actually seeing the general practitioner. The longer the patient has to wait to be seen, the more likely they are to find care from another source.
- Make the patient feel welcome and develop strong relationships with patients to increase their commitment to your practice. Patients are more likely to return to a practice with staff they can connect with.
- Identify repeat offenders by using your practice management system to track no-shows. Place a note on the patient file and schedule repeat no-show offenders during a time that has less of an effect to the overall schedule, eg end of the day.
- Develop a short-call list for patients who want to bring their appointments forward and insert into cancellation spots in the schedule.
- For those patients who do show up as scheduled, let them know how much you appreciate it. This encourages them to continue arriving on time.
- Always thank patients who cancel and reschedule well in advance of your no-show policy. A little goodwill can go a long way.

## Can I charge a no-show fee?

Where a practice has a policy to charge a no-show fee, the patient must be previously informed.

- Display your no-show policy in waiting rooms and consultation rooms.
- Include the no-show policy in the practice information sheet. Consider a caution system rather than charging on a first missed appointment.
- Advise new patients of the policy when booking the appointment.
- Information should include what the cancellation charge is, whether there is limit on number of cancellations, etc.

## Identifying the causes of no-shows

When preparing your practice questionnaire, consider asking patients the most common reasons why they have not attended a scheduled appointment in the past.

In addition, collect the software data on no-show patients. This data can be used to spot trends, such as which general practitioner in the practice has the highest no-show rates, which patients miss the most appointments, and what appointment slots or times have the highest no-show rates. Once you have established trends, put in place strategies to alleviate the problem.