

# Managing no-show patients at your general practice

When patients don't cancel an appointment, forget an appointment or simply don't arrive, it can leave gaps in your practice schedule and result in lost revenue.

## Duty of care to no-show patients

Your practice has a duty of care to ensure no-show patients obtain the necessary clinical follow-up.

If a patient doesn't arrive for an appointment or leaves before being seen by medical staff, your practice should phone the patient or caregiver to ascertain why they didn't arrive or left the practice early.

The medical staff should be informed about the details of the conversation so a decision can be made regarding any further appointments.

If you are unable to contact the patient by phone, a letter should be sent with a copy kept on the patient's file. If the patient's condition is serious, the letter should be sent by registered post, which requires the patient to sign to accept the letter. Australia Post can notify your practice when the letter has been delivered.

## Strategies to improve patient attendance

- Make a staff member responsible for conducting reminder calls, at least one day before each patient's appointment.
- Send text message or email reminders if the function is available within your practice software.
- Don't overbook your schedule. Long patient wait times can cause future no-shows.
- Ask patients when they would like to attend, rather than assigning the first available appointment.
- Offer patients the convenience of booking appointments on-line or through a mobile app.
- Make patients feel welcome and develop relationships to increase their commitment to your practice. Patients are more likely to return to a practice when they connect with the staff.
- If patients are kept waiting for their appointment, remember to keep them informed, check on them, offer a refreshment or reschedule if the doctor has been called to an emergency.
- Write future appointments on appointment cards or stickers and give them to your patients.

- Make a short-call list of patients who want to bring their appointment forward and call them when there's a cancellation in your practice's schedule.
- Keep appointments each day for urgent cases.
- Schedule an 'on call' doctor for the day to accommodate walk-ins and urgent cases.
- Train practice staff to triage appropriately and determine the urgency of 'fit-ins'. The protocol should clearly state what complaints/symptoms are immediately referred to the general practitioner or practice nurse and when to call an ambulance.
- Maintain timely patient access. No-show rates increase when patients have to wait a long time between scheduling an appointment and actually seeing the doctor.
- Keep track of no-show patients in your practice management system. Place a note on the patient's file and book appointments for repeat offenders at a time that will have less of an impact on your practice's schedule (e.g. at the end of the day).
- Ask patients to complete a questionnaire to discover why they haven't attended appointments in the past and their preferred reminder method.
- Collect software data on no-show patients to spot trends, such as which general practitioner has the highest no-show rates, which patients miss the most appointments and which appointment times have the highest no-show rates.
- When patients show up as scheduled, let them know how much you appreciate their punctuality to encourage them to continue arriving on time.
- Always thank patients who cancel and reschedule their appointment well in advance. A little goodwill can go a long way.

## Introducing a policy to charge a no-show fee

If your practice decides to introduce a policy to charge a no-show fee, patients must be previously informed:

- Display your no-show policy in the waiting room, consultation rooms and practice information sheet.
- The displayed information should outline your no-show policy, no-show fee and conditions. Consider a caution system rather than charging for the first missed appointment.
- Advise new and existing patients of your no-show policy when they book an appointment.

*Whilst all care has been taken in preparing this document, this information is a guide only and subject to change without notice.*

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