

Practice

□ □ □ □ MANAGEMENT

The essential resource for today's GP practice manager

The DNA of a successful practice

Action you can take to improve your did not attend rates

Plus ...
Dementia services in primary care

Auto-enrolment: Your new pension duties explained

Getting to grips with GP drawings



The DNA of a successful practice

More than 300,000 GP appointments are missed every week due to patients not turning up, at a cost to the NHS of around £300m every year. Despite the accumulation of such a huge bill, many surgeries do not fully recognise the severity of the problem

Paul Bensley
Director, X-on

A large proportion of practices simply do not believe that they have a problem with 'Did Not Attend' (DNA) rates. As a consequence, they may not fully appreciate the financial impact of such inefficiency. Practice managers are faced with handling growing patient demands and increasingly limited resources, but this is a scenario that could be eased if the DNA problem were reduced.

It is tempting to blame the patients, but that does not help to address the problem. The question that GP surgeries should also be asking themselves is, 'What action can I take to improve DNA rates?' Here are a few ideas you can start with.

Avoid the appointment lottery

When patients initially contact their local surgery it is vital they can make an appointment quickly and effortlessly. One of the biggest bugbears for any customer is being forced to wait on hold, in a queue, where they could be the first call answered or they could have to wait behind 10 people who dialled the number after them. Surgeries

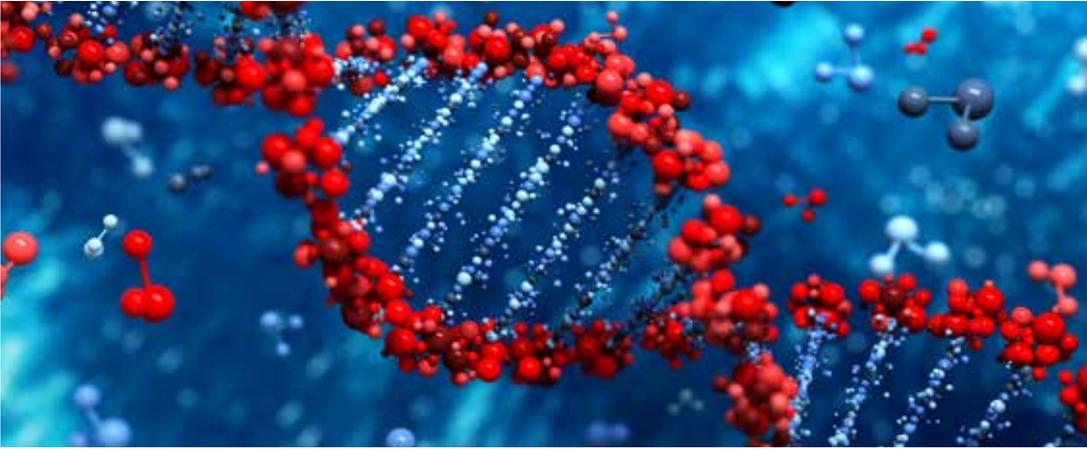
'An automated SMS reminder system must go further than just detailing the time and location of an appointment – it has to be a two-way process to have an impact'

must ensure that first come, first served call management systems are in place, or that the patient is aware of where they are in that queue to reduce potential frustrations. Patients are customers. Customer service and access is improving dramatically in almost every sector, whether it is retail, banking or hospitality, with the introduction of new customer-focused technology, and the pace of this change is only increasing. With this in mind, patients are only likely to get more dissatisfied if the customer experience at their local GP surgery does not keep up with the improvements they are seeing in the rest of their daily lives.

Commitment to a cause

One of the most fascinating insights into resolving this problem comes from behavioural studies that suggest patients are much more likely to attend appointments if they are required to commit a confirmation to the practice in question. By inviting the patient to actively accept or decline an appointment, GP surgeries can significantly improve DNA rates. It is a psychological action that is proven to work. The problem is that too many practices have no way to do this, or rely on very basic SMS text message reminder systems that do not do enough to solicit this commitment from patients when arranging appointments.

An automated SMS reminder system must go further than just detailing the time and location of an appointment – it has to be a two-way process to have an impact. Once surgeries require patients to actively reply to these reminders, they can confirm appointments, and save the time and money that would otherwise be spent rearranging



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missed appointments and help use GP time more efficiently. While practice managers may assume they are doing all they can to improve patient attendance through using their existing reminder systems, they would be advised to look into how effective and up-to-date these are. The problem is not that surgeries do not have reminder systems in place; rather that they are rarely sophisticated enough to have the required impact.

Voice recognition

Given the increasingly stretched resources of NHS organisations, it is crucial that any new, more effective reminder systems do not prove to be an unnecessary burden on administrative staff when they are introduced. Deploying effective voice recognition technology can play a big role in easing the workload. Use of the latest versions of this technology allows patients' appointments to be identified from their initial conversations and reminders automatically assigned to the relevant number.

This technology really works and has improved dramatically in a short time. It cuts out a significant amount of the manual work that receptionists would be doing otherwise by chasing up patients and tracking down phone numbers to send out reminders. Used in conjunction with some of the other technologies mentioned earlier, a practice can work efficiently and focus on reducing DNA rates, giving surgery staff more time to improve the customer service to the patients in attendance.

Handling cancellations

Even with the implementation of a sophisticated reminder system, sometimes patients will have to cancel. When this is the case, practice managers must ensure

these requests can be handled simply and efficiently. Patients do not want to have to sit in a queue in order to cancel an appointment.

A simple solution is to give the option to cancel through the automated reminder system. Whether using this method, or by setting up a dedicated cancellation hotline that could even be powered by the latest voice recognition software, practices can automatically give time back to their stretched staff while simultaneously giving patients a smoother experience.

Do not assume everything is in order

A common problem throughout the NHS is that staff are pushed for time and often having to deliver across several roles. With this being the main focus, the technology in GP practices can be left untouched for years. Employees assume that they have technology already in place that will handle patient demands and are reluctant to change their habits and systems, fearing it will have a negative impact on how well they can do their jobs.

Rarely is the technology in place focused on solving the specific problems that a practices are currently facing. One of the biggest issues facing small businesses in the UK today is inefficient technology and overly complicated processes. Any practice manager or GP receptionist will recognise this. The most effective way to deal with this is to introduce the most effective and efficient systems to improve it.

If general practices are to avoid continuing to suffer from issues such as DNA rates, and keep up with the developments being made in other industry sectors, a clear focus on exactly how technological deployments solve real problems will be critical. **PM**