

## *Online appointment technology – fact sheet*

### **Introduction**

Appointment booking systems are an essential feature in patient scheduling and a well-organised system can save time and increase efficiency for the practice to deliver timely healthcare.

An increasing number of practices are now offering patients the option of making appointments online. Different options of online appointment technology are available on the market, and general practices are able to choose the system which best suits the practice's requirements.

This factsheet is designed to help practices who are considering introducing an online appointment booking system for patients.

### **About online appointment technology**

Online appointment technology refers to solutions that allow patients to book an appointment to see a GP, as an alternative to calling the practice by phone.

Depending on the technology option, patients are able to book appointments by:

- filling in an online form through the practice's own website, or
- using an external service provider either through their secure website or a software application.

The RACGP recommends the use of online appointment technology for routine, non-urgent appointments only. Where practices adopt online appointment technology, they should continue to advise patients to phone the practice directly for urgent and non-routine appointments.

The RACGP re-iterates that an online appointment system does not replace the role of the medical receptionist in ensuring that the practice *'has a flexible system for determining the order in which patients are seen, to accommodate patients' needs for urgent care, non urgent care, complex care, planned chronic disease management, preventive healthcare and longer consultations'*<sup>1</sup>.

If the practice chooses to set up an online form through the practice's website, the practice should ensure that the website is secure to minimise the risk of hacking and potential privacy breaches. Please refer to the *RACGP Computer and information security standards 2nd edition* ([www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/standards/computer-and-information-security-standards/](http://www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/standards/computer-and-information-security-standards/)) for information on practice website safety and security.

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<sup>1</sup> RACGP Standards for General Practices 4<sup>th</sup> Edition

## **Online appointments through a service provider**

The practice sets up an account with the service provider and identifies which appointments are to be made available for online patient booking. Practices should reserve a sufficient number of slots for on the day appointments which can only be accessed by phone or in person.

Depending on the service provider, the practice may elect to only allow online appointment booking services for existing patients or allow potential new patients to access the service.

Some online service providers require patients to register for the service while other sites may only require an identifier such as a phone number. As well as accessing online appointments through a website, some service providers may also offer patients the option of using a smartphone app. Once the patient logs into the website or app, the patient will be able to search for, access and reschedule appointments in real time. When the patient selects a suitable appointment date and time, the practice is notified electronically. It is recommended that the practice further validates and confirms the appointment to ensure that all patients are accommodated and contacts the patient if required.

## **Advantages of using an online appointment system**

The practice can:

- utilise another mechanism to book and secure appointments
- determine all scheduled appointments for the day for multiple GPs in the practice
- improve efficiency for reception staff who may spend less time arranging appointments on the phone
- fill last-minute cancellations/appointment gaps and empty appointment slots

The patient can:

- make an appointment at any time of the day or night, not needing to wait for business hours
- self select an appointment from a range of available times and days
- change or cancel appointments

## **What are the characteristics of a good online appointment system?**

The system should encompass different aspects for all users i.e. GPs, reception staff, practice personnel and patients. You will need to consider how the system you choose integrates with the practice management software your practice currently uses.

The vast majority of practice management software will have inbuilt appointment scheduling capabilities for the practice. Online booking services for patients are usually provided through the practice's website and a good system should integrate into the practice's management software. You may also consider providing the option of making online appointments via mobile devices such as mobile phones and tablets.

You should select the most appropriate service provider whose patient appointment booking system best integrates with your practice software. With many choices available on the market, you can select the most suitable option for your practice for both software integration and cost.

## **Other considerations**

When introducing an online appointment system into your practice, the following needs to be considered:

### **Practice considerations**

- will there be additional workload for reception staff
- what education and awareness is needed for practice staff
- will there be initial additional workload for practice staff
- what impact does booking appointments online have on the existing triage process
- what are the risks for patients who book appointments online
- how will the practice manage potential booking errors and cancellations by the patient
- what support/back-up is provided if the online system breaks down

### **Patient considerations**

- will this service be offered to existing patients only, or to all patients (including new patients)
- how is the patient contacted if the GP is inadvertently unavailable on the day
- patient needs vary and you will need a practical system to accommodate changes when required
- patients who do not have information technology ability or internet access should have the option of making appointments by phone
- is the patient comfortable with providing their details to an external service provider

### **Implementation considerations**

- what online appointment systems are available
- does the system integrate with your current practice software
- what are the costs (initial and ongoing)
- will it be introduced as a trial
- how will the success of the online appointment system be evaluated
- what are the practical challenges of implementing such a system