



1.6 TEXT MESSAGING IN GENERAL PRACTICE

About text messaging

Text messaging is sending electronic messages between two or more electronic devices such as mobile phones, tablets or PCs. The messages are traditionally sent via telephony Short Message Service (SMS), this includes web based applications on smart phones and tablets. In small businesses it is common to send bulk or individual text messages to consumers from a computer to a handheld device and this is called web texting.

Text messaging in general practice

In general practice, text messaging allows practices to make contact with a patient or multiple patients quickly and efficiently. For example, patients can be notified of changes to the practice or receive reminders about their appointments.

Improving business efficiencies and patient care with text messaging.

Using text messaging in your general practice can provide benefits to patients and improve your business outcomes. With approximately 15 million smart phones in use in Australia and, almost the entire nation glancing at their mobile more than 440 million times a day, text messaging has become an accepted method to contact patients (Australian Family Physician - General practice ethics: text messages and boundaries in the GP-patient relationship – article). Some of the benefits include:

- Convenience

With most Australians using their phone daily, text messaging is an easy way to communicate and reach people in a fast and efficient way. It allows information to be exchanged immediately instead of relying on other forms of communication, such as postal services, which can often be slow, expensive and at times unreliable.

- Low cost

Text messaging is a cheap and easy to use form of communication with many mobile plans having an unlimited text messaging capacity. This is in contrast to the rising cost of postage.

- Available technology

Text messaging has been around for over a decade. It is not a new feature or function that needs to be learned by the GP or patient, which makes it easily available, simple to use and well accepted.

- Doesn't require an internet connection

Unlike email, text messaging doesn't require an internet connection to send communications. Providing your phone has a telephone signal, and is registered on the relevant subscriber network you can send and receive text messages from almost anywhere in Australia making it prompt and immediate.

- High open rate

Most people monitor their phones closely and read their text messages immediately, so your messages are less likely to be ignored than messages sent via email or post.



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Text messaging: A guide for general practice

Despite its many benefits, there are certain issues and risks you need to be aware of before using it as a way to communicate with your patients. For example, whilst the Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Act 1979 'prohibits the interception of communications passing over a telecommunications system and access to stored communications' text messages are an unencrypted form of communication and it is, therefore, the practice's responsibility to ensure that private and sensitive information about the patient is not routinely disclosed via a text message. In addition, patient privacy and confidentiality needs to be protected in accordance with the Australian Privacy Principles (APPs). To mitigate the risks associated with text messaging and to ensure you conform with relevant legislation:

- Routinely confirm the patient's mobile number(s) in their health record
- Record clearly in the patient record consent or refusal to receive text messages.
- For routine text messaging utilise a practice dedicated mobile phone or web subscription.
- Recognise that text messaging by its nature may be perceived by some patients to be more informal than a phone call or letter from the practice.
- Recognise that using a personal mobile number to send messages may interfere with or compromise your personal life and privacy. Once a provider has broadcast their mobile number its subsequent dissemination cannot be controlled or restricted. Patients could pass it on to other patients of your clinic or to anyone else for that matter.
- Consider equity issues. Text messaging certain or select patients may result in disparities in health care delivery. It may be a disadvantage to patients who don't have a mobile phone. Protocols regarding communications and information handling may need to take this into consideration.
- Avoid 'text speak' when text messaging patients as a text message from a practice will be regarded to be a professional communication and can pose an issue if patients confuse the abbreviated text language and interpret it incorrectly. This may particularly apply to patients where English is a second language.
- View any text messages sent and received as part of the patient's medical record. The fact that a text message was sent to a patient and its contents should be recorded in the patients' health record, including the date and time the message was sent or received.

phone has a telephone signal, and is registered on the relevant subscriber network you can send and receive text messages from almost anywhere in Australia making it prompt and immediate.

Is text messaging right for your practice? Things to consider:

When deciding if you would like to communicate with patients via text message, there are a number of things that need to be considered to balance the benefits of this form of communication with potential risks.

As suggested above, it is important for practices to develop policies supporting the responsible use of text messaging. The policies should clarify when it is appropriate for GPs to send a text message to their patients and for what reasons. The list below provides a summary of some of the considerations when deciding to use text messaging. This list is not exhaustive and may not include considerations unique to your specific business needs. This list is not simply a check list, but should promote thought and discussion to help you determine whether the use of text messaging has an acceptable level of risk for both the practice and patients.:

- My practice has a policy on the responsible use of text messaging
- My practice has a protocol on how text messages are included in patient electronic health records.
- My practice has a protocol on how consent or refusal is obtained and documented for patients for text messaging
- My practice makes checks to verify the patient's mobile telephone number(s) is up to date and accurate.
- My practice is aware of my obligations under the Privacy Act /Australian Privacy Principles to ensure that our patient's privacy is protected.
- My practice is aware that text messaging is an unencrypted form of communication and any information communicated can be intercepted.
- When using text messaging the practice is aware that communicating identifiable patient information can breach privacy and confidentiality laws if intercepted or accessed by the wrong person.



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Supporting resources

Australian Family Physician - General practice ethics: text messages and boundaries in the GP–patient relationship

This article provides a case study and ethical consideration on using text messages in general practice. The case provides a patient's and GP's perspective while exploring how to safely use text messaging in general practice.

<http://www.racgp.org.au/afp/2015/august/general-practice-ethics-text-messages-and-boundaries-in-the-gp%E2%80%93patient-relationship/>

Handbook for the management of health information in general practice

General practice has a fundamental role in ensuring the privacy of patient health information. In regard to text messaging, this handbook provides information on direct marketing and the laws around the promotion of services and scheduled reminders via text messaging.

<http://www.racgp.org.au/download/Documents/e-health/handbook-for-the-management-of-health-information-in-general-practice-.pdf>

Guiding principles for clinical follow up systems in general practice software

These guiding principles aim to support clinical information system software vendors and general practices achieve consistency in the way that information is handled by different clinical information systems with 'recalls' and 'reminders'. Together with a standards based approach this consistency will improve the manner in which information is collected, managed and stored, improving efficiency and assisting in reducing clinical risk.

<http://www.racgp.org.au/download/Documents/e-health/Guiding-principles-for-clinical-follow-up-systems-in-general-practice-software.pdf>

Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Act 1979

This page provides information about the Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Act 1979 which was amended effective from 13 June 2006 to provide significantly improved privacy protection for email, SMS and voice mail messages stored on carriers' equipment. <https://www.efa.org.au/Issues/Privacy/tia.html#overview>

Using email in general practice –guiding principles

Although this document doesn't directly talk about text messaging patients in general practice it does explore that they are increasingly receiving requests from patients, other clinicians and third parties for health information to be sent to them electronically. By adhering to the guiding principles you can make an informed decision whether to electronic communications in your practice. <http://www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/ehealth/protecting-information/email/>