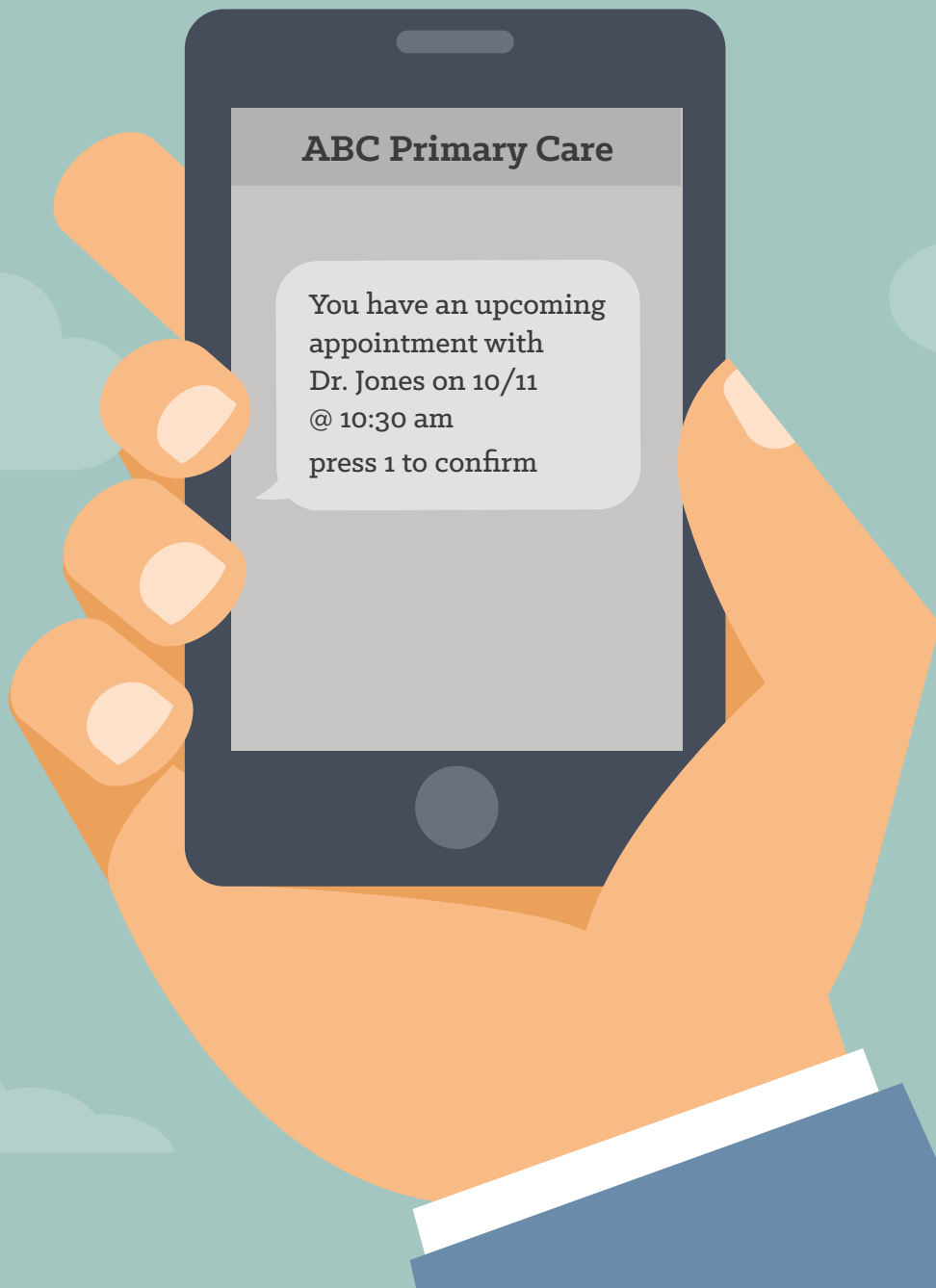


Why Doctors Are Checking In With Patients Through Texting



According to an article published on the **American Medical News** website, CEO and President Barry Green of Med Practice Informatics in Norwalk, Connecticut, asserts that physician practices can *reduce staff time from one hour, per doctor, per day to less than 10 minutes by using text messaging systems for appointment reminders, lab calls and follow-ups*. Green also estimated the savings experienced by doctors who use text messages to communicate with patients, in addition to increased revenue coming from the physician's ability to fill saved time with more patient visits, could boost a practice's profit by at least \$100,000 annually.

Communicating With Patients via Texting—Preserving the Financial Stability of Medical Practices

Current implementation of text messaging in the health care field can be used in any of the following areas:

1. **Appointment reminders**
2. **Medication reminders**
3. **Preventative health information**
4. **Pain management/chronic pain information**
5. **Educational messages regarding diseases, procedures and medical conditions**

Reminding patients of upcoming appointments by text message represents the most cost-effective area of the five categories. The results of a randomized-controlled study conducted by Leong et al found that attendance rates of two groups—one given messages via phone call, the other through text messaging—differed significantly, with the attendance rate of those receiving text reminders reaching 60 percent, a full 20 percentage points higher than that of the phone reminder group. Additionally, expenditures associated with text messaging were lower than costs of the phone reminder.

Hospitals also suffer critical financial damage when communication among doctors, nurses and patients lacks expediency and efficiency. A study by the Ponemon Institute found that the majority of U.S. hospitals average nearly \$2 million in lost revenue annually while a survey of 450 U.S. healthcare providers by the Imprivata Report on the Economic Impact of Inefficient Communications in Healthcare discovered **"\$1 million could be saved per hospital per year by using text messaging for clinical communications during three critical workflows: patient admissions, coordinating emergency response teams and patient transfers."**

Text Messaging Reduces No-Show Costs While Promoting Patient Communication

Procedure and appointment reminders via text messaging not only enhances the ability to provide patients with information vital to receiving timely care but also lowers the high costs of no-show rates. For example, the Healthcare Financial Management Association conducted a Kaiser Permanente pilot experiment that showed **doctors who texted appointment reminders saved "the organization over \$150 for each missed appointment, which translated into annual savings of \$275,000 at a single clinic."**

Loss of Productivity Means Loss of Revenue

Next to hospitals and larger medical facilities, family practices stand to suffer the most financially due to lost productivity through no-shows for appointments and scheduled procedures.

The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFA) provides these startling statistics that show just how much a private practice physician loses to no-shows:

- Missing one fee-for-service patient visit per day results in approximately **\$15,000 in annual losses** (assuming 210 days of visits and a \$72 average visit charge).
- Missing one capitated patient visit per day results in a reduction of the patient panel by approximately 87 patients, which is a loss of approximately **\$12,500 per year** (assuming 210 days of visits, an average of 2.4 visits per year per patient and a \$12 per-member-per-month (PMPM) capitation rate).

In addition, the AAFP states that practices **lose productivity** by having an excessive number of unnecessary visits, which tends to minimize the services and complexity of each visit. Ultimately, this creates a loss of reimbursement per hour for time spent.

Text Messaging and HIPAA Compliancy



HIPAA does not expressly require the use or avoidance of any specific modes of communication. Thus, HIPAA does not expressly prohibit (or even mention) texting. Using any means of communication, appropriate safeguards must be in place to ensure the privacy and security of Protected Health Information (PHI) communicated. HIPAA regulations define protected health data as information that is "used, in whole or in part, by or for the covered entity to make decisions about individuals." According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, "HIPAA regulations ban physicians from using traditional SMS for any communication that contains ePHI data or includes an order for a patient to a hospital or other healthcare setting."

However, the Joint Commission did not decide to ban all SMS solutions. **Using traditional SMS text messages is not in violation of HIPAA when the message does not contain any information that is used to make medical decisions for the individual.** Examples would be appointment reminders, treatment bills, lab notifications, collection notices, recall messages, etc. Instead, they implemented the Administrative Simplification provisions (AS) that detail guidelines for establishing secure communication systems that contain ePHI data. These guidelines list the following areas critical to compliance: encryption, secure data centers, recipient authentication and audit controls.

Using a secure, private texting network for all PHI data instead of traditional SMS systems means that health professionals can remain compliant with HIPAA regulations when sending or receiving patient information while shortening response times, improving diagnostic outcomes by obtaining better information, intervening more rapidly in problematic cases and allowing multiple doctors to engage in communication within the same message.

Advantages of Texting for Patient Communication

- Minimal costs compared to manually calling patients or mailing appointment reminders, treatment bills, lab notifications, etc.
- Patient outcomes dramatically improve when texting is used to maintain confidential relationships with patients
(**Patient-Physician Communication: Why and How**).
- Sustained patient-doctor communication via texting can **improve the patient's emotional health** (specifically anxiety and depression), expedite resolutions to symptom and pain control and improve the status of chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes.
- Texting encourages adherence to prescribed therapeutic treatments by reiterating information that helps the patient better understand his or her medical condition and the importance of the treatment.
- In certain instances, text messaging may **help reduce the risk** of medical mishaps and the potential for physicians to suffer a medical malpractice claim.
- Since the majority of patients visiting an obstetrician are in their 20s and it is this demographic that uses texting as their main source of communicating with others, doctors who incorporate texting as a way to maintain communications with pregnant patients can potentially improve pregnancy outcomes by personally reminding patients of scheduled appointments and encouraging good prenatal health practices.
- Using text to remind patients of upcoming appointments not only minimizes no-shows but also reduces waiting times for patients who do show up for their appointments. This can help eliminate patient dissatisfaction, increase revenue and further streamline private practices, hospitals and county clinics.

Positive Patient Outcomes Not Totally Dependent on Medications and Clinical Procedures

Patients suffering moderate to severe illnesses **experience a deep dependency** on their doctors to provide them with the care necessary for returning or maintaining their health. Moreover, the doctor-patient relationship is "remarkable for its centrality during life-altering and meaningful times in persons' lives, times of birth, death, severe illness, and healing."

Narrowing the communication gap between physicians and their patients through texting is a powerful method that needs to be utilized by all medical professionals who are deeply committed to providing the best patient care possible by reducing overhead expenditures and facilitating the complex task of mediating day-to-day operations.

ABOUT US

PhoneTree® has been helping people connect since 1989 with automated communication solutions. Our HealthWave® and HealthWave Connect™ product lines help increase practice profitability by providing technology for personalized patient connection using phone, text, and email messaging. PhoneTree products offer seamless integration with many practice management software systems and provide a direct line of communication to your practice's network of patients to help improve patient outcomes.