LOW COST ELECTRONIC SERVICES FOR THE HEALTH CARE PRACTICE

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Running a modern health care practice can be expensive and often causes concern to both new and established practitioners. Fortunately, low-cost and free electronic services are available which can fulfill essential office management functions. First, these electronic services may provide an effective charting and office management system. Second, a practice may use these programs to implement an effective patient contact, recall and marketing system. Finally a practice can establish and electronic presence for patient information and practice promotion. While traditionally these functions are expensive and time consuming, there are effective, efficient and inexpensive electronic alternatives.

OFFICE MANAGEMENT AND CHARTING

Patient charting and filing have traditionally been performed on paper. Electronic health records have been replacing this traditional method. Electronic health record software, or cloud, services can be expensive. There are many different software or cloud based services available. The expenses vary and can easily run from $250 (Aetna health) to $700 (Allscripts Professional) per month. With start up costs up to $7000 (eClinicalWorks), the costs can be quite high. (Practice Fusion, 2015) There is an alternative to these expensive systems, Practice Fusion. Practice Fusion cloud based software is free for medical professionals. Practice Fusion is a full featured system that in addition to S.O.A.P. format, offers billing, prescribing and imaging integration. Signing up is easy. Go to practicefusion.com, enter basic information and you are ready to go in minutes. The site offers a multitude of templates uploaded by other users, including many useful for osteopathy. (Practice Fusion, 2015)

While Practice Fusion is relatively easy to use, it does not seem to allow for an easy way to download patient lists in a useable format, which makes patient recall or contact difficult. In order to manipulate patient data, there needs to be a way to query patient files. To do this, you need a patient database. Office suite software usually includes a database program as well as other programs that can be used to perform basic office management. There are many office software suites available. Probably the most famous office suite is Microsoft Office. Unfortunately, this software can be expensive. Microsoft is transitioning to a subscription based system, so the expenses are now ongoing. (Microsoft, 2015) A free alternative to Microsoft Office is Apache Office, offered by OpenOffice.org.   Apache Office is a full featured office suite featuring word processing, spreadsheet, presentation and database functions.   While it takes a little time, many office processes can be tailored from this free office suite. The word processor module can be used to create patient information forms, exam forms and office related correspondence. The spreadsheet module can be used to set up office book keeping. There are templates included in the program which can be customized to individual office needs. (OpenOffice.org, 2015) I actually still handle most of my office bookkeeping from a spread sheet template I devised twenty years ago from a similar spreadsheet program.

While spreadsheet functions are useful, having an effective database may be more important. Database programs are most useful for being able to issue recall and target marketing. The database module is easily tailored to enter patient data. I recommend using headers to include patient name, address, email, phone, most recent visit, reason for visit, recall date and birth date.

Once patient data is entered, it can be saved in a format called comma separated value. Comma separated value (or CSV), is a common way to be able to upload patient data into other programs. These programs include electronic health record software, recall programs and marketing programs. The most important function of a database is to be able to perform queries. Queries are essentially ways to manipulate the data, such as recall dates, address areas, back pain sufferers, etc. Once a specific query is obtained, it can be saved in a CSV format, the importance of this will become clear as we cover other services. A common query is to obtain a recall patient list. This can then be used to create mailing labels for placing on postcards. There are many vendors that supply custom and ready printed postcards for health professionals. While this is an effective way to contact patients, it is time consuming and somewhat labor intensive. There are other alternatives.

PATIENT CONTACT, RECALL AND MARKETING

The internet has allowed for more options in effective patient contact, recall and marketing. I have found several innovative services to compliment traditional methods in this regard. MailChimp (www.MailChimp.com) is an internet based site for performing bulk emailing. MailChimp offers free to low cost bulk emailing. Signing up takes minutes and you can begin email campaigns right away. The site offers excellent tutorials and a multitude of templates and examples to help guide you. MailChimp allows email campaigns of up to 2000 names at no charge. Once you have signed up for a free account, creating campaigns is essentially a three step process that the website works you though. Along the way, there are help guides and templates that make the process easier. The site also features real examples from other users that offer ideas for your campaign. You could use this site for patient recalls, marketing or just to send a practice newsletter. MailChimp also has tracking statistics that you can use to evaluate your campaign. These statistics include bounces, viewings and more. The key to making this a truly useful site is being able to create campaigns. This is where having a patient database is important. You can query your database for recalls or target marketing and save in a CSV or Excel format. The file is then uploaded to MailChimp and the campaign can be created. I had never used this site before and it took me about ten minutes to sign up and create a primitive mailing that I sent to my family. I anticipate this will make a very easy and inexpensive way to contact patients electronically. (MailChimp, 2015)

Patient confirmation is an important way to remind patients of appointments. Historically, this required direct phone calls to patients the day before their appointment. This is an effective way to contact patients about their appointment times, but is also time consuming. DailMyCalls .com is a site that can make calls to patients electronically. You can send text messages or voice calls to an entire phone campaign in seconds. There is no equipment or special hardware to buy. To use the service you can record the message you wish to send. This can be done by typing in the message and selecting either a male or female electronic voice. You can also record your own voice and message to use. You simply enter a call back number and DailMyCalls will call you back to record your message; it will be played back and you can re-record as needed until you are satisfied with the message. You can send one free call campaign per week. If you need to send more, you can purchase credits to be used as needed. Creating the campaign is a three step process. First, create the message you wish to send. Then, create your call list. The call list can be a CSV list, from your database, that you upload. Finally, select calling options, such as when to send and caller id. I have used this service to recall patients and it seems as effective as

personally calling. DailMyCalls has a call reports page that gives detailed information about the calls made. The site breaks down each individual call and reports how the call went. This could be useful to allow you to call again to make sure the call was received. The reports can also be stored in a CSV format, to upload in database format.   You can also manage your recordings and campaigns, to be used again. (DailMyCalls, 2015)

While contacting patients by email and telephone are important, traditional mail is still a useful way to send information. You can use your database to produce labels to place on postcards or letters for mailing. This is a time consuming process and there are alternatives. Click2Mail.com is site that offers several ways to send personal correspondence in minutes. The site offers "Easy Letter Sender" which has fill in forms that allows quick and easy letter or postcard creation. Images can be uploaded to personalize the mailing. While the site is not free, it does seem affordable. Mailings campaigns can be postcards, letters, flyers, or even booklets. The site offers several mailing options. Priority mail plus offers same day mailing. For an official record, certified mail can be chosen. For a verified response, reply mail is another option.   To start the campaign, you need to complete three steps. A return address needs to be entered; this is the address that undeliverable mail can be returned to. The recipient addresses need to be entered, which can be uploaded from your database in the CSV format or can be manually entered.   The last thing that needs to be done is to choose your format, letter or postcard. Using the default font and size, your first page holds twenty three lines of text. This is approximately 350 words. Subsequent pages hold more lines and can include up to 10 pages. There is the ability to customize content with various fonts and sizes. Finally, there is a preview option that allows you review the content of your campaign. Click2Mail would be a very useful service if you were moving, retiring or adding additional services and needed to send a bulk mail announcement. There are times when a mass mailing can be the most effective way to make major announcements. (Click2Mail, 2015)

ELECTRONIC PRESENCE

Having an effective electronic presence for information and promotion is necessary in today's medical environment. Patients need a way to find out about you and your practice. An up-to-date website is both a simple and an effective way to present information about you and your practice.   Unfortunately, there seems to be limitless array of hosting solutions, varying from free to expensive. According to Christopher Heng at TheSiteWizard.com, there are four main areas to consider in website creation. The first is domain name. He feels that it is a must to own your domain name and I agree. By owning your own domain name, it gives you the freedom to move your site to different hosts. If you use the host's name, which is often done in free web hosting, your site will end up with a confusing sub host address. An actual example of this is a site I created   http://home.earthlink.net/~gaskinseye. Domain purchasing will run about ten dollars or so per year. The second important consideration is web hosting. A commercial web host is recommended. GoDaddy.com charges about thirteen dollars per year and that includes your domain registration. Christopher Heng again recommends against free sites, because they can go out of business and they have too much control over your site. Free site hosts often offset their overhead by advertising on your site. I have used free sites before and have even found advertisements from competitors on my site. An example of a free site I created is found at http://gaskins.20m.com. (20m.com, 2015) I agree free sites should be avoided. The third consideration is software. There are various software suites you can use to design your site like

Dreamweaver, but at $399, it is expensive. (Heng, 2015) I have found that commercial hosts like GoDaddy, include their own software. GoDaddy has various hosting levels to choose from. GoDaddy's basic web hosting includes a very nice site designer and is included in the $13 dollars per year cost. If you want a more complex site the cost goes up, but so does the ability to create a more effective site. I have used the basic plan and was able to create a very nice site. I currently use a more featured design program that costs $5.95 per month. The site I created with this software is located at www.gaskinseye.com. The fourth consideration, according to Christopher Heng, is advertising. Advertising is an optional way to promote your site, through outside sources. This seems more of a consideration if you are selling products and not services. TheSiteWizard is a good place to go for tips and more information on setting up and designing your website. (GoDaddy, 2015; Heng, 2015)

There are some other website like hostings that are offered by vendors as a service to their customers. Vistaprint.com is a good source for branded marketing tools like business cards, postcards and other promotional items. They will also allow you to create a promotional online business card. An example of the one I created can be found at www.gaskinseyecareonline.vpweb.com/. (Vistaprint, 2015) Some internet providers still have free website creation as part of their service. This again yields a confusing sub host website domain, but can be very useful to store linked pages for your primary website. I store links for my patient information sheet and HIPPA notification on an old Earthlink.com site, for example http://home.earthlink.net/~gaskinseye/PATINFO.pdf. These are also great places to store old, still functioning websites, for example http://home.earthlink.net/~philipgaskins/. Over time you can create multiple sites, all interlinked, that gives your practice a more effective internet presence. (Earthlink, 2015)

Facebook today is also a must service. I believe most people know about this service, but it is still worth mentioning. Facebook allows for a variety of ways to create your business site and provides a comfortable platform for patient's to visit. It is easy to add continual content and updates. Linkedin, while more of a professional to professional contact site, is still a good site to have. These services are both free. (Facebook, 2015; LinkedIn, 2015)

CONCLUSION

There are many free and low cost services available to help both the beginning and established practice perform traditional practice functions. One of these functions is having an effective charting and office management system. With the shift toward electronic records, Practice Fusion allows for effective charting at no cost. The software is full featured, providing S.O.A.P format record entry, billing entry, imaging linking and electronic prescription writing. Practice Fusion even allows for patients to view their own medical records. Apache Office, from OpenOffice.org , provides for a free office management suite. Apache Office has word processing, presentations, spreadsheet and database functions that are top of the line. The suite includes some wizards to help with basic forms, labels and presentations.   A second function is having an effective patient contact, recall and marketing system. Several internet businesses exist to assist in these areas. MailChimp is an internet based site for performing bulk emailing. It offers easy set up and tutorials to assist in quickly producing bulk emailing. The site includes actual mailing examples and a wide variety of templates. MailChimp also tracks email statistics for reference and a typical office mailing is free. DailMyCalls .com allows you to send text

messages or voice calls to an entire phone campaign electronically in seconds.   The site allows for one call campaign per week at no charge. The site tracks call statistics for tracking and reference. Click2Mail is a web based service that provides low cost bulk mailings. The mailing options include postcards, letters, flyers and booklets. The site also features same day delivery, certified mail and return confirmation. Click2Mail allows for custom fonts and layouts to present professional mailings. A third function is having an electronic presence for practice information and promotion. Having a business website is a necessary and effective way to provide information about your practice to patients. Creating your site is easy with services like GoDaddy. GoDaddy provides low cost domain registration and low cost tools to fit any budget. Websites are a great way to describe services, office hours, location, contact options and information about you. There are also free complimentary hosting sites like Vistaprint. Facebook is another free resource to compliment your web presence. Facebook features blog like listings and provides for quick updates about your business services. LinkedIn offers a professional to professional networking platform that compliments your other listings. Like Facebook, LinkedIn is free. The internet offers a multitude of entrepreneurial opportunities. Among the offerings are a host of services to help traditional practice functions. Many of these services are low cost or free. These services typically perform tasks more quickly and efficiently than traditional methods.   This allows the practitioner to concentrate more on professional treatments and less time on time-consuming office operations.

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