Appointment Reminders

Innovative Appointment Reminders, built into the Electronic Health Record software, make it easy to use and administer.

CHALLENGE

In today's technology era, public health departments and other healthcare providers are faced with many reasons they have to think and function differently. The onset of Electronic Health Records (EHRs) and Meaningful Use (MU), and more so, a new generation of tech-savvy patients with smart phones, require them to put a modern twist on things; provide interactive and mobile-ready communications and appointment tools. "The millennials' world evolves around technology – that's what they want," said Dr. Cardra Burns, Health Director, Halifax County Health Department.

However, it is not simply about keeping up with what the patients want, but also the need to continue providing quality care on a thinning budget. Technology is helping all businesses improve service and reduce costs. So, how can the medical clinics also take advantage of innovative technology to improve patient care and save money too? Research shows that appointment reminders via email, voice-mail or text messaging reduce patient no-shows and improves organizational efficiency.

"No-shows were a huge issue for us because they are costly and time consuming for the staff and providers and a headache for the owners" says Darryl Stanford, Co-founder and Director of Finance Turning Point Family CARE. "I looked around for 6-8 months for appointment reminder software that would be able to communicate with our consumers."

Tommy Jarrell, Health Director, Richmond County Health Department, had a different problem. "We had an old patient reminder system that we had been using for several years, but the other system was fairly expensive and it had recently stopped communicating with Health Information System (HIS). Every time our HIS software changed, there were always difficulties for the two systems to work together.

BENEFITS OF PATAGONIA HEALTH EHR

▶ Improved staff efficiency

▶ Decreased departmental expenses

▶ Reduction of no-shows

▶ Improved patient perception

TECHNOLOGY TREND

▶ Always on, always connected

▶ Text and email preferred
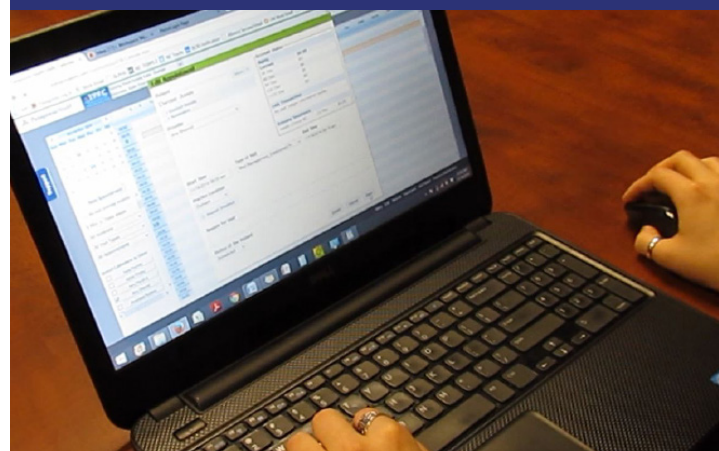
Our staff was once again spending a lot of time manually calling people to remind them of their appointment the following day. It was time to find a system that would work with our EHR and send reminders automatically without the need for manual uploads."

SOLUTION

Based on feedback from clients, Patagonia Health developed its Appointment Reminders functionality, which allows clinics to communicate with patients via voicemail, text or email. Based on information within the EHR, clinics can reach out to certain patients (e.g. sorted by certain age group or diagnoses) with targeted messages e.g., to do community health assessment using voice or text or email. "We sat down as a group with leadership and other supervisors to brainstorm on every way to use [appointment reminders] thinking outside the box," says Dr. Burns. "We saw the functionality as a way to use technology more efficiently and allow our staff to work more efficiently."

The result was a built-in electronic automated "patient reminder system and outreach tool" that is completely integrated with the Patagonia Health EHR software. "the Appointment Reminders functionality is very easy-to-use, as are the other parts of the EHR system. Once we got the instructions for set-up, it was quite self-explanatory," said Elizabeth Buffaloe, Administrative Assistant/Deputy Registrar, Halifax County Public Health System.

When creating an appointment, patients can choose to receive one or more emails, voicemails or text messages. The EHR will choose pre-configured defaults based on the patient's communication preferences (including English or Spanish), which the staff can override.

BENEFITS

Measuring the benefits can vary from clinic to clinic depending on the population they serve and the reporting systems they use to measure outcomes. So what can you expect to see? The benefits have proven to be vast across all facility types.

Let's Do The Math

Prior to using Appointment Reminders

- ► 30 calls/day

- ► Average 4 minutes/call

- ► Average hourly pay rate $13/hour

Using the Appointment Reminders

- ► Save 2 hours per day

- ► Save $572/month or $6,840/year

Improved Staff Efficiency and Decreased Departmental Expenses

"We called an average of 30 patients each day before we had the Appointment Reminders functionality. The appointment reminders save a lot of time having to make these calls. Now our staff can spend time answering patient calls, scheduling clinical appointments, and managing other tasks," says Elizabeth Buffaloe. Improved staff efficiency can turn into reduced departmental expenses due to a reduction in required staffing hours. With minimal funding this can be a huge benefit for medical clinics.

Reduction of No-Shows

While population demographics vary, no-show rates can remain difficult to manage and measure. "The number of no-shows did not improve much due to our client population's prepaid cells and they change their phone numbers frequently. This has no relation to the app, only our population in general. We would have had the same problems with calling manually so this still saves us time in that aspect," said Buffaloe.

But for many, the Appointment Reminders functionality is a leap in the right direction. "No-show rates are something I watch carefully, so I am excited to already see a positive trend," says Jarrell. "We have only been using appointment reminders for 3-4 months and I already have an acceptable drop in no-show percentages."

Improved Patient Perception

The Appointment Reminders functionality has improved the perception of many departments as being modern and more up-to-date. "Our patients really prefer the texting – They receive everything by text or email so they really appreciate this feature," said Buffaloe. Dr. Burns adds "It is important because we need keep up to stay relevant!"

"The more we use it, the more ideas that come out and the technology grows - it will become something far more dynamic. I would absolutely recommend Appointment Reminders because of the immediate cost savings we saw and for all its forthcoming developments."

Alisa Leonard, RN, BSN, MPH
Director of Nursing & Implementation
Team Member

SUMMARY

Communicating with patients, in a means that they prefer, will go a long way towards improving internal work flow, reducing no-show rates, and modernizing your communications and perception of your facility. While the Appointment Reminders functionality is already saving thousands of dollars to current users, it is also undergoing modifications to add requested new features. "The future of the Appointment Reminders functionality is important to us because we are moving towards integrated care. We are looking at the bigger picture of how we can provide better care overall to high risk and vulnerable populations and how that data can be shared and aggregated coming out of our system" says Dr. Burns. "The more we use it, the more ideas that come out and the technology grows – it will become something far more dynamic. I would absolutely recommend the Appointment Reminders because of the immediate cost savings we saw and for all its forthcoming developments."

Dr. Carda Burns
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Elizabeth Buffaloe
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At Patagonia Health, we empower healthcare communities to achieve desired health outcomes with easy-to-learn, innovative technology solutions backed with highly-referenceable customer service. Patagonia Health collaborates with healthcare organizations to improve the wellbeing of their communities. We serve those who serve others.

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