

Adding Value: The Practice Website

What use is a Practice website? The answer to this question depends largely on the commitment of the Practice to make it work. A website only becomes useful when people use it, and to use it they have to know it exists in the first place. Active promotion is key to its success. Every opportunity should be taken to advertise the website and its functions, both within the Practice premises and as part of any direct communication with patients. Once the website is used and patients experience the benefits it offers they have no reason to go back to how they did things before and the website then becomes an integral part of the patient/Practice interaction experience. It's at this point that cost and time savings become a very real possibility for the Practice.

“The improvement to the level of patient care that can be derived as a result [of having a Practice website], with functions such as access to practice information and ordering of repeat prescriptions will be twofold: reduction of costs and better levels of patient care.”

- Michael McGrath, Usability News, 20 April 2004

But how does the website actually achieve a usefulness for the patient which will in turn produce cost and time savings for the Practice? Answer: By allowing both patient and Practice to do things in new and different ways. The website's role is to work alongside of or replace existing working practices, by providing things like:

- 24 hour access to up-to-date Practice information
- Online patient registration
- Online repeat prescription ordering
- Online appointment booking
- Online information requests, e.g. travel vaccination information
- Links to regulated healthcare information websites
- Downloadable forms
- Downloadable Practice booklet
- Practice news and bulletins

The provision of these kind of online processes and information empower the patient to find out and do things that would normally require a phonecall or visit to the surgery. So the patient has information instantly available at the touch of a button and the Practice is able to reduce the amount of administration involved in handling forms and answering phones, thus reducing costs. A win win situation for all concerned.

This 'empowerment' is particularly the case for disabled and/or older patients - the fastest growing computer/internet user market segment - who may find it harder to physically get to the surgery in person.

And think of the reduction in 'unnecessary foot traffic' in the waiting area if you can educate patients to carry out certain tasks via the website, again resulting in cost and time savings which can be put to more productive uses.

Another area where the Practice can save money is the all too familiar experience of the out-of-date Practice Booklet. This can now be avoided with the use of a downloadable Practice Booklet. When hardcopy versions are required - by either Practice or patient - they are simply downloaded from the website and printed off by the end user. Waste and expense are kept to a minimum. The same is true of any form or information sheet produced by the Practice.

So, what use is a Practice website? Well, if designed and built properly, and containing useful functions that the patient actually wants, and then actively promoted by the Practice to educate patients about new and easier ways of doing things, then it can be very, very useful indeed. It won't be instant, and it will have a learning curve to overcome, but the very worthwhile end results should speak for themselves.

What are you waiting for, the future is here.