

Is it cost effective to implement a computerised reminder system in my practice?



Most practices would agree there are a number of good reasons for implementing a reminder system for health promotion activities such as pap smears, cholesterol checks, etc. These reasons would include medico-legal risks, good marketing to patients and practicing good medicine. However, many practices would question its cost effectiveness in an environment of rising costs for general practices.

The Monash Division of General Practice decided to examine one practice in detail over a 3 month period to determine the response rate from its regular reminder letters.

Background

The *Local Family Medical Clinic* has had a computerised reminder system in place for 4 years. The practice became fully

computerised just over 2 years ago and have been utilising Medical Director software for its reminder system since then.

Therefore the practice has had a well-established reminder system with good involvement from most doctors within the practice.

The current level of patients seen per week averages 400 per week for the 3.3 EFT doctors. A GP currently co-ordinates the system whilst bedding down the administrative/computer systems as well as encouraging increased computer use by his colleagues.

The purpose of the review was to measure the response rate of the reminder system to provide feedback to the practice. These were the results:

LOCAL FAMILY MEDICAL CLINIC
Response rates for reminder system

	Sept	Oct	Nov	TOTAL
Reminders sent	10	18	19	47
Patients attending	4	10	14	28 (59.5%)
Interventions taking place for re-call reason	4	9	14	27 (96%)

"It is interesting to see that almost all patients who attended in response to the reminder letter, had an intervention take place." The question is always "Would they have returned anyway?"

Files of patients who did not call for an appointment were reviewed to examine the reasons for non-attendance. The reasons where known were:

- Patient already had smear (1)
- Patient overseas (2)
- Patient attending specialist (1)
- Not a current patient of clinic (not seen for over 12 months) (1)

The average time between the letter being sent and the patient being seen was 16 days.

"A reminder system is good marketing to patients and can cover the cost of the purchase of a new computer for the practice in a 12 month period."

Did the response rate vary with the reason for the reminder?

Reason	Reminders sent	Response rate
Normal pap smear	18	9 (50%)
Abnormal pap smear	1	0 (0%)
Childhood Immunisation	2	1 (50%)
Adult Immunisation	10	6 (60%)
Other reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depo Provera • Cholesterol • Blood test • Bone density • Diabetes Review 	15	12 (80%)

Comment: "Where there was a reminder for something with no fixed time e.g. routine pap smear, the response was lower than where there was something more time-critical."

Did the response rate vary with the gender of the patient?

	Reminder sent	Response rate
Males	16	10 (62%)
Females	31	18 (58%)

Comment: "It was surprising that where men had consented to having a reminder letter sent actually returned for a visit. Perhaps it is coincidental."

What income is the reminder system producing?

With 28 patients attending a consultation over this 3 month period as a result of a reminder letter (at an average of \$30 per consultation), this equates to \$840. The costs in generating this income were:

GP time (overview) 1½ hrs @\$100 ph	\$150
Mail	\$25
Junior staff time: 1½ hrs @\$16 ph	\$24
TOTAL COSTS:	\$199

The question is always -
 "Would the patients have attended without the reminder?"

TOTAL INCOME GENERATED = \$641 for a 3 month period

Comment from the Practice

"Over a year, the reminder system would cover the cost of purchasing at least one computer. A reminder system is like an insurance that those patients will return which is good for the patients and good for the practice. More staff time spent in following up non-attenders could possibly result in a better response rate. Most of the reminder system activities can be delegated to the practice staff."

