



How Available Should You Be for Your Patients?

Each physician must find a level of availability that works for them, their practice, and their patient population.

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Practice Management Pearls is a regular feature that focuses on practice management issues presented by successful DPMs who are members of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management. Visit www.aappm.org for more information.

Do you remember being a child and seeing your elementary school teacher at the grocery store? It might have been so out of place that you didn't recognize her. You probably hid behind your mother wondering how she escaped from the school. Years ago, there were always professionals who were held in high regard and didn't expect to see them out and about with the common folk. Doctors were high on that list. It's no longer the case.

In today's fast-paced and interconnected world, the role of physicians has evolved beyond the confines of the traditional doctor-patient relationship. Whether right or wrong, patients now expect more accessibility and convenience when it comes to their healthcare needs. Should physicians embrace being more available to their patients?

Technology has allowed physicians to be more accessible. Patients no longer rely solely on scheduled appointments at their doctor's office. As communication has become easier and more informal, many patients are looking for a more direct way to reach their physician. What comes into question is what physicians

should share with their patients. Should they provide their cell phone number and email addresses? Should patients be texting their doctors?

There is a benefit to more direct lines of communication. For one, it can enhance the patient's satisfaction and provide a sense of trust and comfort with the practitioner. The patient feels confident that they can reach their doctor if an urgent medical sit-

uation arises, or simply if they need

have peace of mind postoperatively. Some practitioners may choose to give out their cell phone number. Others will carry a separate cell phone for this purpose, so they can control the possibility of intrusion. Still others may choose to give out their home phone number. There's no right answer, only a comfort level that is different for each practitioner.

Another area of a podiatry prac-

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uation arises, or simply if they need clarification on their treatment plan. Patients will feel more comfortable knowing that they can reach their doctor without going through layers of office staff gatekeepers. Ultimately, physicians being more accessible can strengthen the doctor-patient relationship and lead to better outcomes.

It does not have to be an all-or-none proposition. There are ways to segment the practice's patient population and provide access to those who need it most. For example, it may be important to you that surgical patients have a way to get in touch with you directly. After all, they invested in your services in a most serious way. You may choose to break down some of your firewalls to ensure that their concerns reach you, so that they

tice that may require closer contact are wound care patients. Several apps are available to visually document the appearance and size of the wound. Some of these apps have a patient-facing version that allows for the patient to communicate through HIPAA-compliant messaging. If a patient becomes concerned about a change to their wound, they can take a picture and reach the doctor to check it. It may lead to a quick antibiotic prescription, an expedited office visit, or other means to stop the wound from worsening.

Some situations are not life and limb-threatening where ease of communication can add value for patients. For instance, a sports medicine-oriented practice may wish to

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provide personal contact information to elite athletes. This gives the athlete the confidence that his/her physician is a vital part of their team and can be relied on and contacted if there is an issue leading up to an upcoming event or race day.

Some practitioners have created a premium level of service which includes more direct access to the physician. The physicians charge the patient who wishes greater access or priority appointments a monthly or annual fee for this privilege. This can be considered a hybrid concierge model. It is difficult for a specialist's office to be a complete concierge practice in ways that have been embraced by internists, pediatricians, and family practitioners. This model creates a concierge-level tier within the practice.

As a word of caution, you must be selective on how you frame the level of personal access that is provided to pa-

tients. It is not recommended to extend access indiscriminately to an entire patient base. The overwhelming majority of patients who are provided access are respectful of the time and boundaries of the physician. Even so, to prevent

to document these interactions as part of your medical record. Physicians must exercise caution and professional judgment in all forms of patient communication to avoid legal and ethical violations.

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abuse, physician access should be limited to select patient groups and framed to be used for emergencies only.

It is also important to stress that text messages, emails, and digital communications are subject to the same privacy regulations as traditional medical records. If you are using a third-party app, be sure it is HIPAA compliant, and a Business Associates Agreement is signed. It also is crucial

Using technology like apps for specific patient groups, such as wound care or elite athletes, can enhance care. Yet, it also opens up a broader discussion about the equitable distribution of healthcare resources. If certain patients receive premium-level access, it raises questions about healthcare equality and accessibility for all patients, not just those who can afford

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additional services or those deemed as needing more direct care. That is why a baseline of physician accessibility must be established for all patients. This can include phone calls, emails,

ing. Strategies such as setting specific hours for patient communication, delegating certain types of inquiries to other healthcare team members, and utilizing automated systems for common queries can help manage workload and reduce burnout. It is

the lack of meaningful professional boundaries. Each physician must find a level of availability that works for them, their practice, and their patient population. As healthcare continues to evolve, so too will the methods and means of communication between physicians and patients, necessitating ongoing adaptation and thoughtful consideration of what constitutes effective, compassionate, and sustainable patient care. **PM**

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and communication through the practice's patient portal.

This discussion also must include the well-being of the physician. Physician burnout is a growing concern, and the pressure of being constantly available can exacerbate this issue. It's crucial to emphasize the need for physicians to balance their professional responsibilities with personal well-being.

important that increased access to patients does not mean that they end up working 24/7.

The question of how available physicians should be for their patients is not one with a simple answer. It requires a careful balancing act, considering the benefits of increased accessibility against the potential for physician burnout and



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