COMMUNICATING WITH PATIENTS USING EMAIL AND THE INTERNET

This is a summary: the full paper can be accessed at nursingtimes.net

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This article describes vital considerations for healthcare professionals when using email to communicate with patients, and discusses advantages and disadvantages. It offers practical advice on email usage and suggests using basic counselling skills during email communication.

Use of the internet is becoming increasingly common in society. Nurses may – either now or in the future – need to develop skills in using email to maximise the benefits and minimise the potential pitfalls of conversing with patients in this way.

CONSIDERATIONS

Confidentiality

Nurses have a duty to protect patients’ confidentiality by avoiding any inappropriate disclosure of patient information (NMC, 2004). Emails from patients should only be accessible to those directly involved either in patient care or in the running of the service. Patients’ details held on computer should be as carefully protected as written records, and it is vital that the computer software offers sufficient security (NMC, 2007). Also, the email system software itself must be secure to avoid breaches of confidentiality. Practitioners must also ensure they comply with statutory regulations such as the Data Protection Act 1998 when storing emails or using patients’ contact details.

Healthcare professionals should use a designated work email address rather than their personal one to protect confidentiality and maintain appropriate boundaries.

Accountability

Practitioners are accountable for the information and advice they provide to patients, regardless of the method used to communicate it. To ensure email content is clinically accurate and evidence-based, many organisations have a policy of peer review, which reduces the chance of clients receiving an email that may be misleading. Having clear organisational guidelines about the scope of email communication may also provide staff with extra support and security.

Resources

Organisations will have to consider their resources before offering patients the option of having email contact. However, as it can give people a permanent, written record, it may reduce repeat queries from patients who have forgotten or felt unsure about previous advice or information.

PROS AND CONS OF USING EMAIL

One of the main advantages of email is the convenience it offers to both patients and practitioners. Emails can be written at any time, potentially making it easier for those who find it difficult to consult with healthcare professionals during working hours.

Staff responding to the email can also do so in their own time, giving them space to research any difficult questions or consult with colleagues. However, there will always be an element of time delay between sending an email and receiving a reply, it is not an appropriate way of dealing with any queries that are urgent or an emergency.

Email can be used by those living in remote communities or people with a disability that may make attending face-to-face appointments difficult. It therefore has the potential to increase access to healthcare for certain groups.

However, it has been found that internet use is more common in younger people who may be wealthier, so this may increase certain social inequalities.

Communicating by email requires a level of literacy that may exclude some people from using the service. Healthcare staff who write to patients may benefit from training to improve the ‘readability’ of their emails.

It should also be noted that email use requires patients to be confident using computers, and a proportion of people neither possess a computer nor have experience of email.

Since email provides a written response, it allows patients to re-read information. It can be difficult to absorb large amounts of detail during a face-to-face consultation or phone call. Times of high emotional stress, such as receiving a diagnosis or bad news, might further reduce people’s capacity to retain information. Having an email to read in their own time may help patients to better understand aspects of their diagnosis or treatment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- As the popularity of the internet and email grows, patients may increasingly expect to use it as a means of communicating with practitioners.
- Using email has implications for confidentiality, resources and accountability; these need to be carefully considered when designing email services for healthcare settings.
- Patients may benefit from the convenience and accessibility of email, which may ultimately empower them to be more responsible for their own health.
- A range of methods for communicating with healthcare professionals must always be available to meet the needs of patients who lack access to computers, computer skills or general literacy.
- Training may be beneficial before communicating with patients by email to develop a writing style that is clear, easy to read, informative and empathetic.
treatment. Email contact may also allow patients to ask questions they may have forgotten or that only occur to them later.

Anonymity of email
One of the advantages of email is its potential for anonymous contact. While this is not feasible in all healthcare settings, many voluntary sector organisations such as the Samaritans invite email contact from clients without requiring their name or any personal details that might identify them.

People often have personal or private concerns they may feel uncomfortable discussing face to face. Email can be a ‘safe’ way of raising these. It can also give people confidence to seek help about something they were previously unwilling to ask about, perhaps because of embarrassment or concern about ‘wasting the doctor’s time’.

A survey of Breast Cancer Care’s email service found that a significant number of participants (16%) reported using the service when deciding whether to consult a doctor about a breast problem (Leadbeater, 2005). This suggests email contact may empower people to take positive steps in managing their own health.

Communicating remotely does mean that physical examination is not possible. There may be some questions that are impossible to answer fully, so a reply email suggesting clients arrange a face-to-face consultation might reinforce the necessity to have certain symptoms diagnosed and possibly treated.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS USING EMAIL
There is little published guidance to help healthcare professionals improve their email skills. The Telephone Helplines Association has published directions for organisations using email and text services, although they are not specific to healthcare (THA, 2006).

The tone and style of an email may vary depending on its purpose but some style and language considerations remain constant. It is important to use language that is easy to understand and free from inappropriate medical jargon, abbreviations or acronyms. As it can be difficult to read from a computer screen sentences and paragraphs should be as short as possible.

Counselling skills
It is possible to apply basic counselling skills to email communication. This can include acknowledging concerns by reflecting any emotions that patients express.

It can be difficult to communicate warmth and empathy via email, so language – and the way it is used – becomes especially important. It is vital to ensure phrasing is as sensitive as possible, and that patients are aware of where further support might be obtained. It can be helpful to avoid making assumptions by matching language to the client’s, using words of a similar weight.

It is possible to take cues from patients’ emails about the best way to respond. If the email is full of medical detail and displays a high level of knowledge, then it seems reasonable to infer that they would prefer a reply with a similar level of detail.

Providing links
Uniform resource locator (URL) links to other sources of information on the internet can be provided. This allows patients to choose whether they would like more detail on a subject. They also direct clients to other services or organisations.

It is worth remembering that the contents of web pages may be altered from time to time, so it is good practice to check that links remain relevant and up to date.

Patients’ expectations of the service can be managed by informing them of how long they may have to wait for a reply. If a swift response is not possible, it might be useful to provide an alternative method of contact.

CONCLUSION
Communicating with patients using email has many advantages, including flexibility for people who may find it difficult to discuss health matters during office hours.

While other methods of contacting healthcare professionals must be made available, email may provide a valuable tool for those seeking to understand more about their health, illness or treatment.

There are many considerations when offering email as an option to clients, such as staff training, appropriate software and policies to support staff and ensure patients receive a high-quality service.