

Office Staff Try Patient E-Mail Contact and Like It

BY SHERRY BOSCHERT
San Francisco Bureau

SAN FRANCISCO — Nonphysician staff in 10 primary care clinics initially were leery of giving patients the ability to e-mail their clinics, but they became more enthusiastic 6 months after using an electronic communication system, a study of 76 staff members found.

Physicians might be more willing to offer electronic communications to patients if e-mails could be triaged by their staff, Anne F. Kittler and her associates said in a poster presentation at the triennial congress of the International Medical Infor-

matics Association. The study suggests that staff can overcome their initial reservations to embrace the benefits of electronic communications, said Ms. Kittler of Partners HealthCare System, Wellesley, Mass.

Paper-based surveys of 76 staff before adoption of Patient Gateway, a secure Web portal for electronic communication with patients, found that 44 feared that patient e-mails would increase their workload. Only 13 (17%) were enthusiastic

about adopting the system, 28 (37%) were hesitant, and the rest were indifferent or unsure about it. A majority already used e-mail in their daily work routine, usually to communicate with physicians or other staff in the practice.

After full implementation of Patient Gateway in three of clinics, half of 21 staff members who had used the system for at least 6 months were enthusiastic about the system, repeat surveys found. The proportion of staff members hesitant to

use the system dropped to 20% (four people). A majority of the survey participants said that Patient Gateway either reduced or did not change their overall workload.

The surveyed staff members found the system particularly helpful for dealing with patient requests for medication refills, Ms. Kittler and her colleagues reported.

All the clinics used electronic health records before adding Patient Gateway. ■

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