



Carleton University: Case Study



Carleton UNIVERSITY

Informing a student that a fee will be charged for having missed a scheduled appointment creates this kind of stress for clinic staff. In a clinic that services more than 39,000 appointments a year, staff with Carleton University's Health and Counselling Services (HCS) are familiar with the no show process: explanation, reaction and discussion on the implications for missing a scheduled appointment.

CARLETON UNIVERSITY CLINIC STATS

- **39,000** visits per year
- **13** doctors
- **20** support staff
- **200** appointments per day

"We have to cover most all of our costs because the university doesn't pay for these services," says Maureen Murdock, Director, Health and Counselling Services at Carleton University, adding that the university does not cover shortfalls.

"You can't bill for a no show. The doctors expect to be paid, so if we don't charge the students then we're losing a tremendous amount of money."

All missed appointments affect the clinic's bottom-line directly because HCS hires and pays their providers from student fees or by billing provincial health insurance plans. The hour-long appointments reserved for counselling and physicals are the most costly when a student fails to show. This is reflected in the fee for missing an hour-long appointment, \$100, as compared to the fee for a regular appointment, \$45.

Although an original and captivating excuse or heartfelt plea may be able to sway staff in other clinics from imposing penalties, HCS does not have any flexibility to cover lost revenue and the costs associated with running a clinic that employs 13 doctors and 20 support staff to serve more than 200 patient visits each day.

When a student does not show up for a scheduled appointment, then clinic staff must contact the student, explain the ramifications of their actions, listen and discuss before scheduling a make-up appointment. Recognizing a need to reduce the incidence of missed appointments and fully engage staff throughout the day, HCS went in search of an appointment reminder solution.

SEEKING A REMEDY:

As a first step, HCS made efforts to call students to remind them of an upcoming commitment. To accomplish this task, staff prioritized hour-long appointments for reminders, based on the amount of time and the impact these missed appointments would have on the clinic. Inevitably, work conflicts meant that even the prioritized list could not be completed in a day and the practice was soon dropped.

In a tactical change, HCS implemented a semi-automatic reminder system to be overseen and operated by a designated staff member. The success of the system rested with that staff person sending out all the patient reminders for the upcoming week. Patient feedback indicated that the system was not well received, many objecting to the inconsistency of the time between the reminder and the appointment day. As with the manual reminder system, when work demands and staff availability disrupted the system, reminders didn't go out.

THE SOLUTION:

Recognizing that the lifeline to students – and a growing number of Canadians – is increasingly concentrated on the mobile phone that provides phone, voice mail, email and text as essential communication links, HCS adopted Cliniconex's fully automated patient reminder system to contact patients, remind them of upcoming appointments and permit students to immediately confirm or cancel their appointment. The Cliniconex system sends a reminder 48-hours in advance of an appointment, providing clinic staff with plenty of time to react to a cancellation by moving a patient up from the waiting list.

"This demographic lives with their phone attached to their hip, so this method of communication couldn't be better," says Ms. Murdock, responding to the observation of colleague Janis Vaillancourt that many young people sleep with their cell phones nearby.

Prior to the implementation of the Cliniconex system, Joanne McGee, Accounts Administrative Assistant for the clinic, says that on average at least one 60-minute appointment would be missed each day. Receiving cancellations instead of no-shows improves the efficiency of the clinic. While a

missed appointment cannot be back filled, staff can easily fill a cancelled appointment within 24-hours.

With the implementation of the Cliniconex automated reminder system, missed appointments are down significantly. Missed counselling appointments have been almost eliminated, says McGee. And the system provides staff with relief from the constant demands of the phone. The upshot, says Receptionist Janis Vaillancourt, is a more productive clinic and happier staff.

95% OF PATIENTS RECEIVE TEXT REMINDERS AND THE REST RECEIVE EMAIL REMINDERS

"Before, we use to receive a lot of calls from students who had forgotten the day or time of an appointment," says Vaillancourt. Those calls have disappeared and there are fewer complaints from patients who have to wait on hold, as the wait time is much shorter.

Vaillancourt adds that the stress linked to patient reminders and missed appointments has for the most part been removed, replaced by a feeling that she and her colleagues are now able to focus their attention on contributing to improving the health and wellness of their student.

"It's more than just a reminder system. Doctors and staff are finding the clinic working a lot smoother for them and the students love it. They don't know what they would do without it and neither would we," concludes Ms. Murdock.

"It's more than a reminder system. Doctors and staff find the new clinic working a lot smoother for them now. And the students love it!"

- Maureen Murdock Director, Health and Counselling Services

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