

Communicating by telephone

Practice policy

The practice follows the Australian Privacy Principles and the Privacy Act 1988.

To facilitate continuity of care, patients need to have access to a GP via telephone or electronic means to discuss their medical care when a consultation is not considered clinically necessary.

The practice may choose to charge a fee for telephone communication, however the cost must be clearly conveyed to the patient at the beginning of the call and in appropriate written documentation.

GPs and other clinical staff need to make time to return phone calls during the day, and where 'clinically significant' information is discussed, a note must be made in the patient's health record. The definition of 'clinically significant' information is provided in the Glossary of the RACGP Standards.

To ensure effective patient telephone contact, reception staff must be trained:

- to first ask callers if it is an emergency and if not, then ask for their permission before placing them on hold
- to ask for three (3) identifiers before giving any information. This is to verify the identity of the person calling.
- to identify situations when it is appropriate to transfer telephone calls to GPs or other clinical staff
- to know each GP's policy with regards to returning patient phone calls
- to identify situations where it is appropriate to interrupt patient consultations.
- document each attempt to contact a patient in their medical record.
- document all contact from patient to the practice including the reason for the call and advice given to the patient

Further information about staff training is detailed in Induction of new staff members.

If the patient is unable to clearly communicate with GPs and other clinical staff, arrangements must be made to enable mutual understanding. For example, communication could be facilitated through the:

- [National Relay Service](#) (NRS) for patients who are deaf. Phone: 1800 555 660
- [Translation and Interpreter Service](#) (TIS) for patients who speak languages other than English. Phone 131450. For pre-booking: 1300 655081.

Further information about translating through bilingual staff members, family and/or friends, is provided in Interpreter services.

Telephone confidentiality

Communication with patients via telephone must be conducted with appropriate regard to the privacy and confidentiality of the patient and their health information.

Ongoing education and training on confidentiality should be provided to all staff and be included in the new staff induction program. These issues are addressed in Induction of new staff members.

If personal and health information needs to be discussed or collected over the phone, the call is transferred to a private room or area where possible so that other patients and persons cannot hear the conversation.

If a person calls to ask if a family member or friend is or has been at our practice, they must be advised that our practice abides by a strict privacy and confidentiality policy and therefore no such information is disclosed. If the query is pursued, the caller must be advised that a message will be taken and a GP will return their call as soon as convenient.

Practice procedure

In this practice, the procedure for GPs and clinical staff receiving and returning telephone calls is to return phone calls in between sessions. The doctor may decide that it is not appropriate to return a phone call and may choose to ask reception staff to contact the patient to make an appointment to discuss the issue.

In this practice, the procedure for ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of the patient and their health information when communicating with patients via the telephone is to:

- Document each attempt to contact a patient in their medical record.
- Document all contact from patient to the practice including the reason for the call and advice given to the patient
- transfer the call to a private room or area where possible so that other patients and persons cannot hear the conversation
- Ask for 3 Patient Identifiers to ensure you are giving information to the correct person
- Refrain from the disclosure of personal health information to anyone other than the patient and referring the call to a GP if the query is pursued.
- We do not routinely correspond with patients via text message to provide patient information. There may be some instances where a doctor will correspond with a patient via email or text. This is at the doctor's discretion and prior consent will be obtained and documented in the patient record. Patients are not encouraged to contact the practice via email and are instructed that they should not use email to contact the practice in an emergency.

Communicating by electronic means

Practice policy

This practice follows the Australian Privacy Principles and the Privacy Act 1988.

To facilitate continuity of care, patients need to have access to a GP via telephone or electronic means to discuss their medical care when a consultation is not deemed clinically necessary.

The preferred method of correspondence with patients is by telephone or face to face during a consultation. The doctors each have a practice email account and it is at their discretion as to whether they will correspond with a patient by email. Doctors will obtain patient consent before sending an email. The practice email has access to encryption and all medical/clinical information should be encrypted. There will be some instances where this is not possible, and the doctor will obtain the patient permission to send an unencrypted email. This consent will be documented.

Electronic communication confidentiality

The practice emails all have encryption capability and are to be used when sending medical/clinical information unless the patient consents otherwise.

Ongoing education and training on confidentiality should be provided to all staff and be included in the new staff induction program. These issues are addressed in Induction of new staff members.

Further information about our practice procedure for maintaining privacy and confidentiality when communicating electronically with patients will be included in emails.