


Things to Think About Before You...

Provide Telephone Consults as a Helpline GP



General practitioners (GPs) providing phone consults to new patients need to proficiently manage a range of issues to mitigate professional risks, and to enable optimal patient health outcomes.

Phone consultations can provide timely health care to more people, with improved patient and practitioner satisfaction.¹ Yet phone consultations also have inherent challenges² and associated medico-legal risks. So specific skills are required to effectively perform phone consultations and doctors generally require additional training^{3,4} to become proficient with this style of consultation.

MDA National recommends you seek specific advice, from colleagues and your medical indemnity insurer, and consider the following points before providing any GP phone consults to the Australian community.

- Phone consults have the same ethical and clinical standards and duty of care as face-to-face consults. Patient safety must always be at the forefront of considerations.
 - Are you confident that patients' care will be followed up and that continuity of care will be appropriately provided?
 - How will you maintain state and federal confidentiality and privacy legislation at all times?
- Communication skills are even more important over the phone^{2,4,5} because you can't rely on the non-verbal communication cues that take place in person.
 - How do you go about reliably obtaining pertinent information in the absence of visual cues?²⁶
 - Can you consistently deliver highly structured consults?^{25,6}
 - Can you confidently evaluate when phone consultations are not appropriate³ and whether enough information has been given to appropriately respond over the phone?
- Patient consent for both the phone consult and any proposed action needs to be clear.¹
- High quality documentation of each phone consult is critical.³⁻⁵
- High standard information technology equipment and skills are required.
 - Do you have access to a high quality decision support system and other resources that you can confidently and comfortably use (including in relation to their clinical validity)?⁵
 - Will patient data and medical records be securely and reliably stored and transmitted?¹
 - Are you prepared for technical difficulties at any time?²
- Proof of your professional indemnity insurance is required.¹
- Defined opportunities for quality improvement are necessary.¹

Care standards

Whilst the standard of care may apply in the patient's home state or territory even if the clinician is located elsewhere, the issue of standard of care is undefined in consults delivered via phone as Helpline GPs.

Communication skills

GPs providing phone consults need to be even better than usual at interpreting information provided by patients.⁷ Focused history taking is particularly important.^{3,4} Patient-centred communication with active listening and active advising is vital.⁵ There needs to be explicit and ongoing checking of patient understanding.⁵ Phone consult providers must understand what is conveyed by patients' (and their own) speech pattern, tone, pauses and pitch.² Language barriers may be exacerbated over the phone.

Patients' expectations for the phone consult should be clearly identified and managed.

Patient consent

The known and potential benefits, risks and limitations of phone consults must be clearly explained to patients. General practitioners need to ensure they are comfortable with the disclaimers provided to patients in relation to the service.

Documentation

The record of a phone consult needs to particularly detail the patient's clinical history, personal history and situation, and expectations.⁵ Patient identification and consent as well as the full details of any advice given to the patient, and recording the need for any follow up, must also be clearly recorded.¹

Indemnity insurance

Medical indemnity insurers should be contacted regarding the provision of GP helpline services. GPs must be comfortable with the cover provided; including any exclusions e.g. prescriptions related to phone consults may not be covered.

Quality improvement


General practitioners need to be able to evaluate the phone consultation service in terms of clinical and economic outcomes. The health service provided and its governing policies should be continually amended in light of ongoing feedback.¹

Do you feel suitably trained to provide phone consults?

Simulated phone consultations form the basis of telephone consultation training.³ GPs should have substantial call simulation experience before commencing after-hours GP helpline services.

More information

• Contact MDA National.

For a review of telemedicine literature and advice on how to reduce the risks of adverse events see the *Defence Update*, Autumn 2006 article: 'Risk Management for Telemedicine Providers' available at  http://www.mdanational.com.au/media/144805/telemedicine_providers.pdf.

Refer to guidelines by professional bodies. Eg. the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners is developing telehealth standards and educational resources in 2011^B which will be available at  www.racgp.org.au.

References

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