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Gisborne practice staunches phone-bill wound



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Thursday
2 June
2022,
09:48 AM
2
minutes
to Read



An 0508 number gave a Gisborne practice a big phone bill [Image: Alwin Kroon on Unsplash]

Different approaches to communications can be seen in two practices as they deal with overloaded systems and burgeoning costs. **Natasha Jojoa Burling** reports

Three Rivers Medical Centre in Gisborne was whacked with a \$20,000 phone bill last month as the public had been heavily using its 0508 number.



Michelle Te Kira

The practice is preparing itself for winter by launching a text message system for bills, appointments and recalls, says

general manager Michelle Te Kira.

The practice had the 0508 number to “assist with equity”, but everyone has been using it so “phone bills went through the roof”.

During the Omicron peak, people were on hold for up to five-and-a-half hours and the practice was paying for every minute.

It was a similar situation elsewhere and larger practices were overloaded with calls, says Ms Te Kira, chair of the Practice Managers and Administrators Association of New Zealand (PMAANZ).

Call volumes have been unmanageable, even recently. Three Rivers can get 1800 calls in two hours, which even 50 telephonists couldn't manage. Only about a third of the medical centre's patients are signed up to the ManageMyHealth portal. Ms Te Kira says it is user-friendly for doctors but inaccessible for many people; some don't have a computer and internet access is poor in the region.

The practice recently started sending account or appointment reminders via SMS, using its own templates. One Sunday, 200 bill reminders were sent. By the Monday, 80 per cent had been paid. Others texted back to say they would pay the next week. That saved the practice \$8000 on postage and up to 10 reams of paper.

Ms Te Kira says she has put a team in place to deal with texts between 8am and 6pm. Recalls are all done by SMS and the nurses involved monitor the incoming texts.

“SMS is the way to go,” says Ms Te Kira. She says every practice management system has a text-messaging function, which is very quick and cheap and allows patients to reply free of charge.

“Our community prefers texting, and they don’t answer the phone when we ring them.”

The 0508 number was to be suspended on 15 May, and “a bit of raruraru” (inconvenience) was expected.

However, Ms Te Kira is confident the practice will be ready for the upcoming months with the SMS system: “We will be all set – winter’s going to be gnarly, that’s why we need to allow full access.”

On Auckland's North Shore, Dodson Medical Centre in Milford is also working, to get its communications systems up to scratch for winter.

Practice manager Bethan Rajwer says the colder months will definitely be busy.

People are slower to get their influenza immunisations this year, after last year's low levels of flu, says Mrs Rajwer, a PMAANZ board member.

She says the practice has had issues with phone calls dropping out because of long wait times, which has led to complaints. Doctors at the medical centre are swamped with emails, including positive COVID-19 test result notifications.

Text costs have also gone up "horrifically", she says. So the practice is now using Mailchimp to send newsletters out via email, while also trying not to bombard patients with information.

Dodson Medical is also working on making it easier for staff to work from home. Mrs Rajwer says this means ensuring cellphones can be used as part of the practice's phone system, although the cost is significant for a practice.

The nurses can work remotely, but the centre wants more administrators to do so too. Some doctors at the practice are doing one day a week of phone consultations from home. However, phone costs have shot up by 60 per cent.

Mrs Rajwer says the practice is talking to its IT systems provider, which oversees its phones, internet and cloud-based server, about communications options.

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