GP surgery makes more time to care by linking phone calls to patient records

Montgomery-House Surgery in Bicester is saving time and effort for GPs, admin teams and patients by integrating Surgery Connect with its EMIS clinical system.

Using technology to transform general practice is a central theme of NHS plans to enhance and expand primary care. At Montgomery-House Surgery in Bicester, practice manager Steve Sharpe is seeing the benefits of connecting the Surgery Connect advanced telephone system with patient records held in the practice's EMIS clinical IT system.

Steve first introduced Surgery Connect to the 50 staff at the practice about two years ago, having seen the benefits of using VOIP technology in his previous career. He saw that it would help free the surgery, which caters for over 15,500 patients from a single site, from a limited number of phone lines, without having to pay for expensive additional ISDN capacity.

"We could only have eight phone calls going on at once. We could have gone to 30 through ISDN, but we would have had to pay a premium. Now, with Surgery Connect, we can have an unlimited number of lines, and use features such as call queuing and call recording to help improve patient access and better manage how we deal with calls."

To further explore the potential of using the advanced telephone system, Montgomery-House Surgery became one of the first GP surgeries to link calls to patient details held on EMIS, the clinical system used by around half of the surgeries in England.

This has helped to smooth out the process of how the practice handles incoming and outgoing calls, and provided GPs with more efficient ways of managing patient communication.

Creating easier ways to contact patients
When people dial in, Surgery Connect automatically presents patient-facing staff with the patient record associated with the phone number as a pop up on their screen. Previously, they would have to ask who the caller was, and manually search EMIS to check their identity. Now, all that information is one place, saving time in processing the call.

Even if someone calls from a shared number, such as a home landline, the receptionist is presented with options on who the caller might be, and can ask them their date of birth and other details to confirm their identity.

Staff can also use the system to call or text the patient, by dialling directly from the record on the screen.

This is all helping GPs carry out telephone triage, which is recognised in the GP Forward View as a means by which family doctors can better cope with the increasing demands being placed on primary care.

"If a patient wants same day access to a GP, they call in and are added to a triage list," says Steve. "The GPs can then work through this list using the patient details in front of them, and call the patient back using the phone number they want to be used. They don't have to go through each patient record manually to find the number, and then guess which number to use."

The practice is also using the text facility through EMIS. Staff can quickly text individual patients when they need to contact the surgery, for example to make an appointment or come in for test results.

"Before, we would have had to call the patient, sometimes leave a message, and then wait for a call back. The system can now tell us when texts have been sent, and when they have been received."

This is also useful as the Bicester-based surgery acts as a dispensing practice for 3,000 patients based outside the market town. GP surgeries dispense prescriptions for patients that live over a mile away from the practice, and who might not be able to pick up their prescription from a high street pharmacy.

"Once prescriptions are ready to collect we text them. This means the patient calls to the practice to enquire about their prescriptions has reduced significantly, and also means that our dispensing staff do not have to take calls that take them away from organising prescriptions."

"It makes the whole process a lot more efficient and effective," says Steve.

X-on product managers have estimated that the system has saved 10 seconds by removing the need for manually searching for each call that comes through. Over a month, this adds up to 14 hours of staff time, which can now be spent on dealing directly with patients' needs.

Supporting a more productive practice
The phone system has delivered other productivity benefits.

Call recording, for example, is used to help train new members of staff on answering patients' needs. These recordings are also useful in case of any disagreement, for example around making an appointment or what a doctor has told a patient.

"We can go back into the recording to hear what has been said. This can even cover discussions between the GP and outside clinicians, to clear up any confusion over what has been agreed."

The practice is also saving staff time through a central telephone directory. Rather than having to search manually for internal or external phone numbers, staff can use a portal to access phone numbers or email directly from the system.

"We now have one central directory for phone and email on the portal, making an individual GP and admin person's workflow more efficient. With everything centralised, it makes things much easier."

Surgery Connect has helped deliver a series of enhancements that have had a positive impact for staff and patients.

"These small improvements all together make one big improvement. Feedback has been very positive. Some staff might have feared changing to a new system; now, they would not want it taken away."

The web-based VOIP system also provides excellent back-up facilities, in the rare event that internet connections are lost. This, though, has never been an issue at Montgomery-House Surgery.

"X-on provides us with mobile phones in case the internet goes down, so that incoming calls are automatically redirected to the handset should the internet link be lost. But with excellent resilience now available, in the two years since we have had Surgery Connect, we have never had to use them."

These changes have seen tangible improvements in patient experience and access, which are key focus areas for primary care.

"Since we have had the system, we have not received a single complaint about getting through on the phone," he says.

The system is also helping the practice's patient services manager assign staff to areas of highest demand. If there is a queue on the system to get through to the surgery, more staff can be put on the phones. By using Surgery Connect's wallboard, they can see the number of calls that are waiting and for how long. They can then make sure phone lines are answered, and better manage staff time.

Future developments will help meet further demand
Montgomery-House Surgery is not standing still with its use of Surgery Connect as it looks to use the technology to improve the patient experience. It has recently introduced the system's callback feature, so that a patient has the option to be called back if they are waiting in a queue.

The practice is also looking to expand its use of text messages, so that staff can more quickly send out such messages, and include links to further information from the NHS website.

Steve and the Practice work closely with Surgery Connect on such developments.

"They do look for continuous improvement on how to make the system more effective. Other practices also put forward different ideas, which also help to develop the product. They are very responsive."

Like many others in general practice, Steve and the team at Montgomery-House Surgery are doing great work in coping with increasing demands. Telephone technology is helping them face those demands, with gains that add up to much more than the sum of their parts.