



# Patient Communications Policy

## Introduction

This leaflet aims to explain clearly the various means by which we communicate with patients and how patients can communicate with us. Each communication method adheres to the Australian Privacy Principles (APPs), the Privacy Act 1988 and any state-specific laws.

Used correctly, effective communication with patients via telephone and electronic communication ensures that:

- You can contact the practice when you need to;
- You can access their doctor in a convenient, safe and comfortable way if unable to make it into our practice;
- You can make appointments and receive other information in a timely fashion; and
- urgent enquiries are dealt with in a timely and medically appropriate way.

## Telephone Communication

This is often the principle method by which patients and others communicate with our Practice and as such is recognised as a vital tool for creating a positive first impression, displaying a caring, confident attitude and acting as a reassuring resource.

General Practitioners and staff members are aware of alternative modes of communication used by patients with a disability or a language barrier. We have an internal process for Translating and Interpreting Services.

Our reception staff will confirm the patients identity by asking the following approved patient identifiers (items of information that are accepted for use to identify a patient):

- Family name and given names
- Date of birth
- Address

Our team is keenly aware of the importance of seeking to understand the urgency of the call when answering the phone; they do this by trying to obtain adequate information from the patient to assess whether the call is an emergency before placing the call on hold. Courtesy is shown to all callers and every call is considered important. Our staff act to provide a professional and empathetic service whilst attempting to obtain adequate information from the patient or caller, even when the patient may be anxious, in pain or distracted by friends or family.



Staff members are mindful of confidentiality and respect the patient's right to privacy. Our practice prides itself on the high calibre of customer service we provide, including in the area of patient security, confidentiality, and right to privacy, dignity and respect.

The reception team have been informed of when to put telephone calls through to the nursing and medical staff for clarification. In non-urgent situations, doctors will not be interrupted if consulting with another patient, but will be given the information in a timely manner.

Patient messages taken for subsequent follow-up by a doctor or other staff member are documented for their attention (or a designated person in their absence) using our Practice Management Software (Best Practice) message functionality. Any important or clinically significant information is linked and stored in the patient's medical record. See *Telehealth – Telephone & Video Consultations* below for more information.

Non-medical staff do not give treatment or advice over the telephone. Results of tests cannot be given to patients, unless reviewed and cleared by a doctor and only given by our nursing team.

We have provisions in place for doctors to be contacted after hours for life threatening or urgent matters or results.

Staff do not disclose details of patients who have consultations here nor any other identifying or accounts information, except as deemed necessary by government legislation or for health insurance funds.

During non business hours or holidays, a meaningful message is played providing information for medical emergencies, non-urgent after hours care, online options for existing patients and when next the practice will reopen.

### **Telehealth – Telephone consultations**

At the start of the call, the doctor will obtain and document in your medical record your consent to continue as a telehealth phone consultation.

The doctor determines if the advice or information related to your clinical care can be given via a telehealth consultation or if a face to face visit is necessary, being mindful of clinical safety and patient confidentiality. Telehealth phone consultations are treated the same as face to face appointments and fees/medicare rebates may apply accordingly.

If we are unable to reach you for a telephone appointment (e.g. you do not answer at the allocated appointment time, or there are technology issues that prevent



connection), the doctor will document any reasons the communication failed in your medical record.

## **Electronic Communication**

Electronic communication dominates our current world and the methods relevant to our practice are email, SMS, the practice website and the practice use of social media platforms.

### **Incoming Email**

Using e-mail to communicate with our practice is quick and convenient for patients, however it is discouraged due to the insecure nature of email and the risk that a message may not be seen or attended to in a timely manner.

To this end, we have organised an auto-reply for every email that advises:

- Action to take for medical emergencies;
- The services for which a patient will need an appointment i.e. answering medical questions, providing medical advice, completing forms and paperwork and preparing urgent referrals, scripts;
- Incoming emails are only monitored throughout the day and that for urgent enquiries they should phone the practice.

The disclaimer also contains the standard confidentiality statement:

This message and any files transmitted with it may contain privileged and confidential information intended only for the use of the addressee named above. If you are not the intended recipient of this message, you must not disseminate, copy or take any action in reliance on it. If you have received this message in error, please notify the sender immediately.

### **Outgoing Email & Your Consent**

Your consent to receive your health information from us electronically is implied if you initiated the electronic communication request to the practice or if you have provided your email address to us which is stored in your medical record.

Where possible doctors and reception staff will send your health information (e.g. a referral, a medical certificate or blood tests that have been reviewed by the doctor) to you directly from our Practice Management Software. These emails will show as being from your doctor or the reception team member and the first line will say *“File(s) from Bp Premier attached”*.

Where this isn't possible, we will email you directly using the email address you have provided; our team will always seek to verify the email address is still valid and correct before sending the information.



### **SMS**

We use SMS service to communicate with patients including new patient registrations, appointment confirmations and reminders as well as patient recalls & health reminders.

### **The Practice Website**

We use our website to keep our patients, both existing and new, informed about key information such as our opening hours, policies, processes, offerings and fees. We will also publish information from time to time about particular health matters. Our website presence is continually monitored to ensure information remains accurate and up to date.