

## Fishers practice saves time, boosts revenue with virtual visits

How many times a day do patient calls interrupt you? David Pletzer, M.D., of Fishers Family Physicians has minimized interruptions from patients with routine or recurring problems.

He offers them the option of a "virtual visit."

"Many things in medicine call for a discussion, but the patient does not need to be present in front of you," said Dr. Pletzer.

"Virtual visits eliminate the need for patients to leave work, drive to my office and wait for me to talk to them."

While patients pay \$25 for a virtual visit, typically what a co-pay would be, many prefer the option because it saves them time. They're attractive to busy patients with simple or repeat conditions like a sinus infection, sore throat or back sprain, as well as for monitoring.

They're also a good option for college students away from their regular physicians.

If you have Internet access, you can offer virtual visits too. They don't require expensive electronic medical record systems, don't steal time from nurses and staff, and don't really cost a practice.

### Here's how it works

The patient logs onto the practice Web site, uses an ID and password and enters a "portal." Dr. Pletzer describes a portal as "an opening to a secure site so both parties can communicate but no one else can get in and see the information." It passes the test for HIPAA.

On the screen, the software program offers patients a series of questions about their problem and, depending on the initial answers, other questions pop up. (About a cough, for example: How long have you had it? Is it productive?)

When the patient completes the questions, the physician receives an e-mail alert. Physicians may choose to order a prescription, offer advice or ask the patient to schedule an appointment.

Dr. Pletzer, who doesn't prescribe over the phone, responds to his virtual visitors in the evenings and on weekends using his home computer, where he can access their medical records. So, patients can hear from him any time.

The system can also send a text message to the doctor's cell phone, alerting him that a virtual visit is waiting.

### Yes, but...

Can you think of objections to virtual visits? Dr. Pletzer has answers for most of them. Here's a sample:

- **Reduces reimbursable office visits** - "My patients may choose to go to a retail clinic for a sore throat or rash and I wouldn't know about it," he said. "Now I can help them quickly and still have access to the information, to make the visits part of their records."
- **Requires initial financial outlay** - Practices pay a monthly fee for the system but the savings in staff and physician time is substantial. At Fishers Family Physicians, virtual visit revenue pays for the practice Web site.
- **Demands physician time** - "This reduces demands on your time and diverts calls," Dr. Pletzer said. For conditions he handles over and over, he prepares messages ahead of time. Then, when the virtual visit is about a common problem, he begins with a personal note, then pastes in his pre-written note on that condition.

- **Interrupts off-hour time** - "Doctors always get calls at home anyway and usually there is no reimbursement for those calls," explained Dr. Pletzer.
- **Only fits primary care** - "Virtual visits will work for any specialty that gets calls of a less urgent nature," said Dr. Pletzer. Cardiologists can use the system to monitor blood pressure or cholesterol. Dermatologists can use it to check on a patient's acne, getting feedback about how a medication is working.

Dr. Pletzer would like virtual visits to become a bigger part of his practice.

"There are so many things about this that make sense," he said. "For new problems, it wouldn't work but for simple things, it's great!"

Have more questions? E-mail Dr. Pletzer at [dpletzer@ffpmd.com](mailto:dpletzer@ffpmd.com) or call him at (317) 842-2727.

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