

SMS4Health[®] launch

Mobile phones set to improve

by **Marika Azzopardi**

Offering comprehensive healthcare services in one's medical practice does not only involve dealing with episodes of acute illness but also proactively offering preventive programmes aimed at primary prevention of diseases (mostly cardiovascular problems and cancer) as well as vaccination. In any given practice population, the uptake of primary prevention programmes is often sub-optimal and this could explain the high prevalence of uncontrolled, often asymptomatic medical conditions that are significant risk factors for major killers such as heart disease and stroke.

There are a number of reasons why patients fail to attend recommended healthcare checks. Some patients are simply not interested in changing any of their lifestyle habits and are not in the least bothered about whatever doctors tell them. Little can be done for them except persistent, basic, opportunistic education coupled by consistent use of the media by health promotion agencies.

However, for a good number of patients, the problem is not a question of carelessness or neglect but rather a matter of forgetfulness – we are all too busy. We all seem to forget when we are due to check our health and time seems to fly by at an incredibly fast pace. Yet we all know that keeping tabs on

our health is tantamount to enjoying life.

Missed childhood vaccinations, missed cervical smears, overdue blood pressure checks in hypertensive patients, overdue diabetes checks for diabetic patients and well person checks all present a lost chance or a missed opportunity to ensure optimal healthcare delivery. We also know that patient loyalty to the practice depends very much on the perceived level of healthcare offered.

In 2006, a group of eight practices offering private family medicine services participated in a survey aimed at exploring patient perceptions relating to recalls for preventive healthcare interventions through the use of mobile telephony Short Messaging Services (SMS).

The practices in question, which handle a total of 96,000 patient contacts per year, were geographically evenly distributed throughout Malta. The survey was carefully designed with expert statisticians, so that the statistical analysis of the data collected from the survey could accurately represent what actually happens in practice.

The survey specifically looked at current trends in Well baby checks, Childhood Vaccinations, Cervical Smears, Cholesterol and Blood Pressure checks and also honed in on whether patients would be more willing to attend for intervention if reminded by their family doctor.

The results have consistently shown that there is a high degree of patient acceptability of doctor-initiated reminders both in the case of well baby checks and vaccinations as well as in the case of cervical smears, blood pressure and diabetes tests and well person checks. There is a significant number of patients who would only attend for preventive checks if they are reminded by their practitioner. Moreover, most patients who would take up the invitation to attend for the intervention would only go to the doctor who actually sent the invitation.

Implementing a recall system in one's practice is not an easy task especially in practices that do not have appropriate Electronic Medical Records and secretarial support. Postal reminders require lengthy and costly data collection, mail merges, expenses covering envelopes, printing and postage and tedious follow-up methods. Telephone and SMS reminders are costly and very time-consuming. Moreover the processes have to be repeated over and over again with each recall.

Medical Portals has been providing the medical profession with Practical Solutions for Effective Health Care for the past 11 years. This has been done through TheSYNAPSE Suite of services which includes TheSYNAPSE Portal, TheSYNAPSE Direct, TheSYNAPSE eCME and TheSYNAPSE Magazine.

In the coming weeks, Medical Portals will be rolling out this innovative service, aptly named **SMS4Health[®]**, that promises to help medical practitioners provide an automated recall system for their patients. This service



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has been developed after intensive research and development, and the field testing over the past year has been very successful and was characterised by excellent patient acceptability. **SMS4Health®** offers a great opportunity for individuals to better manage their personal healthcare schedule as recommended by their doctor through an automated reminder service. It should help people remember important medical visits, or vaccination appointments. **SMS4Health®** services for dental profession is expected to be rolled out in the coming months.

In practice, doctors who would want to provide the service in their practices will be provided with the necessary computer software (as well as training on the use of this service) so that they can register any patients who opt to subscribe to this service. Once the patient subscribes to this service, his/her details are registered on to the software. The doctor will then discuss with the patient a recommended and personalised healthcare programme. From then on the data is automatically and securely transferred on to the system's servers so that when the agreed date arrives, the patient is sent a personalized SMS, on behalf of his/her doctor, inviting him/her to attend for the agreed intervention. The system is programmed to issue invitations at regular intervals (eg. yearly cervical smears, bimonthly blood pressure checks) but the doctor can actively change the recall date as is medically indicated in each patient's case.

This system offers a number of significant advantages for doctors:

1. All necessary software is provided, as well as training on its use.
2. Data needs to be entered into the system only once.
3. The system works independently of any existing medical records system.
4. A list of suggested interventions, appropriate to age and gender is suggested as soon as patient's demographic data is entered into the system.
5. Internet connectivity is only required when data is uploaded onto the servers. From then onwards, the servers do all the work – all work related to recalls is automatic and "hands-off".
6. All recalls are personalized in such a way that the message includes the doctor's name and contact number.
7. Doctors will receive by email, reports on recalls sent on their behalf.
8. All data is managed in strict compliance with data protection and privacy laws.
9. Provision of support services such as a helpdesk and website www.sms4health.com (details provided below).



*The **SMS4Health®** smart drive contains all you need to operate an easy health maintenance system for your practice*

In short, the system allows the doctor to set it once and forget all about it, allowing the luxury to concentrate on clinical work.

Besides serving as a reminder service, **SMS4Health®** will also be providing regular, health promotion tips and advice to subscribers and will be used to broadcast any significant health alerts that may require urgent disseminations..

Any patient may subscribe to **SMS4Health®** against a nominal subscription fee, and patient registration for this service and recommended healthcare programme needs to be done through the patient's preferred doctor. Medical Portals provides the platform and technology but will not give any recommendations to patients for personal healthcare programmes. Any doctor can provide this service from his/her practice. A provider user group will be formed in the coming months with a view to further improve the services offered.

SMS4Health® promises to change lost chances into new, previously untapped opportunities for improving healthcare in practice.

The **SMS4Health®** website is www.sms4health.com. Interested doctors are invited to contact Medical Portals on 21453973 or email helpdesk@sms4health.com. ☐