



PHYSICIAN REFERRALS IN A DIGITAL AGE

Brandi Musgrave

Patients place a great deal of trust in their doctors. When it's time for them to be referred to a specialist, they generally go with the recommendations they are given from their primary doctor.

Fact: 53.8% of referrals received by specialists come directly from other physicians.¹

In the eyecare setting, physician referrals from optometrists are some of the most qualified leads an ophthalmology practice can receive. Patients who require advanced eyecare such as LASIK vision correction, cataract surgery, glaucoma treatment, and other specialized care will depend on their optometrist to direct them to the best specialist in the area to enhance or protect their vision.

With this knowledge, it stands to reason that making the referral process as easy as possible will improve your practice's bottom line. Your practice should be making every effort to become the preferred practice for these referrals. In fact, physician referrals

should be the livelihood of your practice. Unfortunately, with all of the day-to-day activities in your office, your internal staff may not have the time to give referrals the attention they deserve.

PERILS OF PHONE CALLS AND FAXING

Many practices are still using the time-consuming and error-prone method of faxing/copying referrals and phone-tag phone calls to ensure they go through properly. This is not only an inefficient use of time; it also slows down the entire referral process and keeps the other party wondering about the status of the patient's treatment. Other problems such as insufficient patient information, lack of timely communication between offices, and overworked/understaffed front office personnel can compromise patient care and safety.

From the patient's point of view, this slow process can be extremely frustrating. People are accustomed to everything

being "on demand" now: TV shows, movies, music, etc. Patients who have to wait to see a specialist—i.e., wait for referrals to go through the process—will probably move on to a different doctor who is more efficient. That becomes a lost patient and lost revenue.

ENTER THE DIGITAL AGE

Today practices can send information electronically and be continually informed about what is happening with their patients with little effort. By incorporating a secure online system into your current website, referring doctors can easily enter patient information into web forms so the referral process can be expedited quickly.

One of the most frustrating aspects of referring patients for advanced eyecare is the lack of communication between the "referring" practice and the "referred" practice. This is not to place blame on either side; medical offices are busy places and it's hard to keep up with the constant flow of

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patients. The online database can be designed to allow the referring physician access to the patient's progress at any time, thus strengthening the doctor-to-doctor relationship.

Through an automated email system, referring doctors can be alerted when

- The patient information has been received.
- The patient has had a consultation.
- The patient has scheduled surgery.
- The patient has had surgery and will be returned to their office for follow-up care.

All parties benefit from having this type of system in place:

- The referring doctors have access to their patients' surgery status at any time.
- Precious time is saved on both sides of the process so each practice can focus on patient care.
- Your practice receives a steady flow of high-quality leads for low cost and little effort.
- Patient referrals are processed quickly so treatment can be expedited.
- First office visits become more effective.

Fact: 75% of specialists have received at least one "clinically inappropriate" referral in the past year.²

Millions of patients are the unfortunate victims of misdirected referrals, meaning they are sent to a doctor who cannot treat their specific condition. Using older referral methods, recognizing this mismatch in a timely manner might have taken weeks or months to rectify. With the speed and efficiency of online referrals, this problem can be greatly reduced. The patient will

receive timely, appropriate care and your office will not be bogged down with unnecessary paperwork.

BUILDING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Your office can work to minimize these "clinically inappropriate" referrals by reaching out to other doctors in your area and sharing detailed information about your specialties through office visits, leave-behind brochures and in-office signage for referring doctors.

The key to building an effective referral pipeline is building personal relationships with referring doctors. Ask them what you can do to make the referral process easier. Provide staff training to explain how to electronically refer patients. Send personalized "thank you" notes to referring physicians. All of these small gestures will have a big impact.

ADHERING TO MEANINGFUL USE STANDARDS

Electronic physician referral management systems are absolutely vital to your practice's long-term growth. However, note that your EHR attestation system must meet EHR certification mandates, i.e., they must be fully compliant and certified.

For more information on ensuring safeguards while sharing digital information, see "Safely Sharing ePHI," p. 12, in the July/August 2015 issue of *AE*.

IMPROVING THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE

By improving the physician referral process, practices will be improving the overall patient experience. Practices

with the best overall patient experience will be the ones to beat.

Of course, you must have the right experience, training, and patient success rates to be in the game. However, in today's fast-paced medical arena, those who make the medical referral process as streamlined as possible and keep the lines of physician-to-physician communication open will succeed. When you make it easy for physicians to refer their patients to you, they will be more apt to choose your practice over another. **AE**

NOTES:

1. Pennic, J. (2014, November 10). 19.7M "clinically inappropriate" physician referrals occur each year. Source: Kyruus, Inc. at <http://hitconsultant.net/2014/11/10/19-7m-clinically-inappropriate-physician-referrals-occur-each-year/>.
2. Ibid.



Brandi Musgrave (brandi@fast-trackmarketing.com) is the Business Development Manager at Fast Track Marketing in Broomfield, Colorado.

IN A BLINK

- Physician referrals should be the "bread and butter" of your practice.
- Secure online systems allow referring doctors to easily enter patient information into web forms.
- By improving the physician referral process, both practices will be improving their overall patient experience.