



## Telephone & Electronic Communication Policy

**Our practice manages telephone calls, telephone messages, and/or electronic messages from patients.**

### Telephone communication

Patients of our practice can access a GP by telephone to discuss their clinical care. A GP will always be available during normal practice hours for emergency advice, however if a patient asks to speak to a GP, the staff member receiving the call should assess if the call is urgent and if so, put the caller through to the practice nurse for triaging in the first instance. In non-urgent situations, messages are taken for subsequent follow-up by the GP so that patient calls do not interrupt consultations with other patients.

Messages are sent to the GP via Best Practice messages for the doctor to action. The staff member must make sure that the message is assigned to the correct patient, with a detailed message including any names and dosages of medications and a contact telephone number.

The GP determines if advice can be given on the phone or if a face-to-face consultation is necessary always being mindful of clinical safety and will reply to the message with action taken or decision.

All messages forwarded to GPs should include:

- name and contact phone number of the patient/caller (including afterhours contact details).
- date and time of the call.
- urgent or non-urgent nature of the call.
- important facts concerning the patient's condition.
- advice or information received from the GP.
- details of any follow up appointments.
- details of any repeat prescriptions, medical certificates, or referrals.

Messages relating to patients are linked to the patient's health record in Best Practice so there is a record of the correspondence. Our practice team documents each attempt to contact a patient in the patient's health record.

Non-medical staff do not give treatment, advice or results of tests over the phone unless directed to by a GP. If the caller is inquiring about pathology or imaging results, staff do not

disclose any results but may read any annotations by the GP to the patient. If a GP has asked the nursing staff to phone a patient regarding a result, or wants them to make an appointment, this must be recorded in the patient's health record via contact notes by the staff member.

When phoning patients regarding an appointment or giving results – as per a GP's instructions – staff must use at least three patient identifiers. Messages cannot be left on voicemail/answer machines or with anyone else unless it is notated in the patient's health record that we have permission to do so by the patient.

All communications relating to patient care are noted in the patient's health record. If applicable, patients are advised if a fee will be incurred for phone advice.

Some patients may be anxious and/or in pain and our staff need to provide a professional and empathetic service whilst attempting to obtain adequate information from the caller. Every call should be considered important, and courtesy should be shown to all callers. Staff should allow callers to be heard and must not argue with, interrupt or patronise them.

Staff have been trained to triage urgent medical matters and the procedures for obtaining urgent medical attention – reception staff know when to put telephone calls through to a clinical staff member for clarification.

This practice prides itself on the high calibre of customer service we provide, especially in patient security, confidentiality and right to privacy, dignity and respect. Staff do not openly state a patient's name over the phone within earshot of other patients or visitors. Staff do not give out details of patients who have had consultations at this practice nor any other identifying details or account information – except as deemed necessary by government legislation or for health insurance funds. We do not disclose any personal information to anyone other than the patient.

If a person calls to ask if a family member or friend is or has attended our practice, they are advised that our practice abides by a strict privacy and confidentiality policy and therefore no such information can be disclosed – if the caller persists they can be transferred to the Practice Manager or a message left for the Practice Manager to return their call.

Staff must answer calls promptly – within three rings if possible. Our standard script is: "Good morning/afternoon, thank you for calling the Gladstone GP Superclinic this is '*staff member's name*' how can I help?" Before placing a caller on hold staff must ask: "*is the matter urgent or may I put you on hold?*" and must wait for the caller to answer. If it is an emergency the procedure below is to be followed.

If the call is assessed as urgent the patient will be transferred to the practice nurse who will determine:

- whether the patient requires to speak with their GP immediately or
- if another GP could assist or
- if the patient requires us to phone 000

When callers have been placed on hold:

- do not leave caller on hold for a long period of time.
- ensure music or practice information tapes on the on-hold message are working and can be clearly heard.
- return to reassure caller that they haven't been forgotten and thank them for waiting.

If non-urgent, three of the approved identifiers are used to prove the caller's identity:

- family and given names
- date of birth
- address
- gender (as identified by the patient themselves)
- patient record number, where it exists
- individual Healthcare identifier

**Note:** A Medicare number is not an approved identifier. Medicare numbers are not unique, and some people have more than one Medicare number because they are members of more than one family and are on multiple cards.

Care is to be taken when entering the appointment and before the patient hangs up the phone that:

- the patient's name is spelt correctly
- the patient's contact details have been confirmed
- a contact number has been recorded if it's a new patient
- the patient is fully aware of the date and time of their appointment and which GP they are seeing
- new patients have been advised of the location of the practice and where to park

When talking to a patient on the phone:

- never hurry the caller, or speak with an urgent, loud voice
- if necessary, repeat your questions clearly
- never attempt to diagnose or recommend treatment over the phone
- encourage the caller to write down any instructions and advice given
- ask the caller to repeat any instructions back to you to assess their understanding of what you have said

A comprehensive phone answering message is maintained and our 'on hold' message provides advice to call 000 in the case of an emergency.

### **Use of AI Medical Reception Agents**

Along with other affiliated AusDocs practices, at times we may use an AI Medical Reception Agent to assist with coordinating appointments and responding to patient enquiries. These AI agents may collect your personal and health information as part of this process, solely for the purpose of supporting your care and facilitating efficient communication with the practice.

You have the right to decline to interact with the AI agent and may request to speak with a human receptionist at any time. Your choice will not affect your access to care or services.

## Electronic Communication

When communicating with patients electronically our practice complies with indicator **C1.2►A** by:

- adhering to the [Australian Privacy Principles \(APP\)](#), the [Privacy Act 1988](#) and any state-specific laws
- clearly stating what content, the practice team can and cannot send using electronic communication (e.g. our practice requires that sensitive information is only communicated face-to-face by a medical practitioner or other appropriate health professional)
- informing patients that there are risks associated with some methods of electronic communications and that their privacy and confidentiality may be compromised
- obtaining consent from the patient before sending health information to the patient electronically (consent is implied if the patient initiates electronic communication with the practice)
- checking that the information is correct and that we are sending it to the correct email address, phone number, or person, before sending the information
- avoiding sending information that promotes products and/or preventive healthcare, because some patients can interpret this as an advertisement
- Electronic emails contain patient information are only sent with encryption to protect patient privacy

Patients who have consented to SMS correspondence are sent a reminder each morning via a text message to their mobile phone of their appointment time.

Staff and Patients using email/SMS or other forms of electronic messaging should be aware that it is not possible to guarantee that electronic communications will be private. All personal health information or sensitive information sent by email must be securely encrypted.

When an email message is sent or received during a person's duties, that message is a business communication and therefore constitutes an official record.

Employees should be aware that electronic communications could, depending on the technology, be forwarded, intercepted, printed and stored by others.

The Practice reserves the right to check individual email as a precaution to fraud, viruses, workplace harassment or breaches of confidence by employees. Inappropriate use of the Email facility will be fully investigated and may be grounds for dismissal.

The practice uses an email disclaimer notice on outgoing emails that are affiliated with the practice.

## Accessing the Internet

The Internet is a vast computer network, comprised of individual networks and computers all around the world that communicate with each other to allow information sharing between users. It is important to adopt secure practices when accessing and using the Internet.

The Internet can be accessed by all members of staff; however, excessive use of the Internet is not acceptable.

Staff members are encouraged to use the Internet for research activities pertaining to their role, however, should be aware that usage statistics are recorded and submitted to Management as required.

Staff members have full accountability for Internet sites accessed on their workstations and are expected to utilise this tool in an acceptable manner.

This includes (but is not limited to):

- limiting personal use of the Internet
- accessing ONLY reputable sites and subject matter
- Verifying any information taken off the Internet for business purposes prior to use
- not downloading any unnecessary or suspect information
- being aware of any potential security risks - i.e. access / viruses
- not disclosing any confidential information via the Internet without prior permission from the practice manager - i.e. Credit Card number
- maintaining the Practices confidentiality and business ethics in any dealings across the Internet
- Observing copyright restrictions relating to material accessed/downloaded.

The Practice reserves the right to check individuals' Internet history as a precaution to fraud, viruses, workplace harassment or breaches of confidence by employees. Inappropriate use of the Internet facility will be fully investigated and may be grounds for dismissal.