Short Messaging Service (SMS) patient messaging
Good practice guidance

SMS patient text messaging is a vital patient communication tool for General Practices. The Royal College of GPs recognises SMS text reminders as a convenient way to reduce missed appointments. It is also a useful way to provide test results.

SMS text messaging is a powerful tool when used correctly. This document provides good practice guidance for General Practices to follow.

Before you send a text message

▤ Is your SMS text messaging part of a wider communications approach?

If used as a primary tool, text messaging should have adequate back-up. For example, patients wishing to have results sent by text message should also be given a contact number to call the practice.

▪ What procedures are in place for sending SMS text messages?

SMS text messaging should be used with care and follow protocols. Before sending SMS text messages, practices need to consider the frequency, content, relevance, length & type of message the patients receive. Procedures should be put in place to formalise this.

▪ Who sends text messages from your practice?

It is important to be clear about which staff are authorised to send SMS text messages.

For patient messaging services it is important to be clear about the following:

- Who is authorised to send SMS text messages?
- What agreed structured purposes can SMS text messaging be used for?
- Who manages distribution lists containing phone numbers and other details?

These details should be checked and updated regularly.

▪Does your patient consent?

Patients need to consent to receiving communications via SMS text messaging and this consent should be recorded on their clinical system. Equally a discussion with a clinician and the handing out of an explanatory leaflet about a SMS service can equal consent. The patient should be comfortable with the medium, the purpose(s), and have been made aware of the strengths and weaknesses of SMS text messaging at the outset. And they should be able to change their preferences at any point.

▪Are your patients aware of the risks?

As part of informed consent, patients need to be made aware via leaflets, online content, posters etc., of reliability issues relating to SMS which are beyond the control of the NHS. It is important that patients should inform GP practice staff of any changes to their contact details.

Additionally, in the case of services that allow patients to reply, patients need to be aware that they should not include private details about their medical condition in any message responses:

▪Are your distribution lists properly managed?

As with any distribution list, care needs to be taken to ensure the right message is sent to the intended person.

▪Are you using your SMS patient messaging with due care and attention?

SMS messaging is not a free service and should be used with care and responsibility. The NHS is charged for every message sent, and it's worth remembering that any message longer than 160 characters will be charged as two or more messages, depending on its length. So it pays to check that every message is definitely needed, and to keep it to 160 characters.

Sending a text message

▪Are your SMS templates ready?

For routine structured messages it is useful to create a bank of carefully worded and approved messages to draw upon.

Examples:

"Test result 1 for Hawthorn Clinic, call X on 00000"

"Test result 2 for Cedar Clinic, all is fine".

▪ Are your SMS messages concise?

SMS text messaging should be kept short and concise, preferably no more than 160 characters.
And remember: the longer the message, the less likely the patient is to absorb the information.

▪ Have you prepared your SMS text message from scratch?

If you wish to create a SMS text message from scratch, please do not copy wording directly from existing email messages. The emails may have contained names or facts which are confidential, and therefore should never be shared to SMS, even if an integrated email/SMS tool allows this.

▪ Have you kept it simple?

Keep to upper and lower case letters, numbers, commas and full stops. Do not use special characters, symbols, smileys or graphics. Assume the intended recipient has the most basic phone with a black and white screen. If a language other than English is to be used then careful testing is required.

▪ Did you remember to include a contact number?

It is acceptable to run an SMS service that does not enable a user to reply by text but the message should always include a contact telephone number or email address in case of queries.

▪ Does your message identify the intended recipient?

It is important to identity the intended recipient in the SMS message so that they understand that the message is intended for them and is not spam. At the same time it is important to avoid putting in too many identifiers, in case the message is read by an unintended person. As a general rule, inserting just the first name of the person early on is adequate
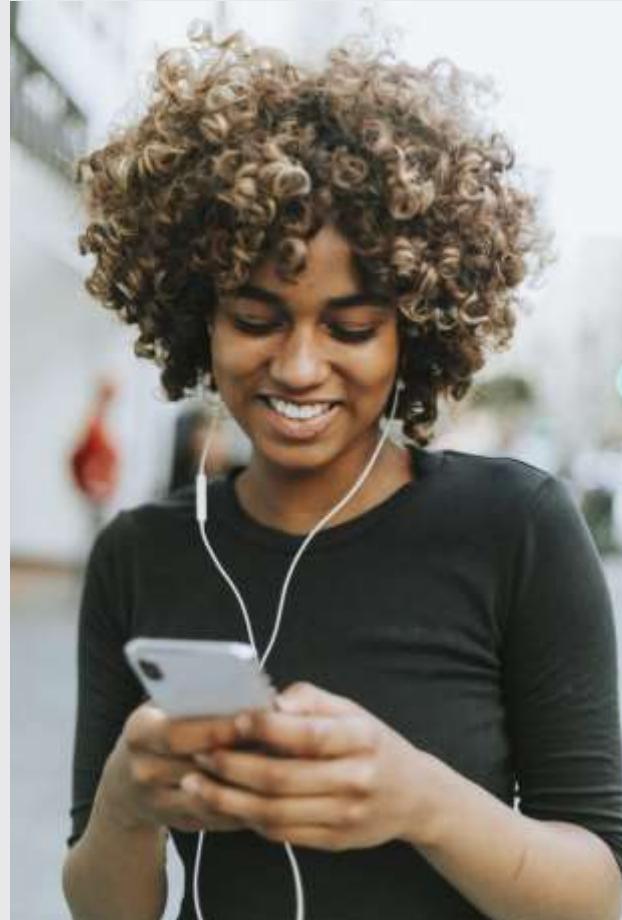
For example:

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NHS do not reply

Michael, a reminder of your screening
appointment, 15.45 at Hawthorn practice
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There may be special circumstances where a surname (Ms, Mr Smith) might be used or just a unique code which both parties understand in the case of tests

For example:

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NHS do not reply
code number 6578
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Your test result, all is fine,
ring 0800 12345 if you need to discuss.
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▪ General Practice Disclaimer

It is important to prepare a GP practice disclaimer to give to patients before beginning to send them text messages. Suggested text for the disclaimer:

"If you agree to the GP practice contacting you via your mobile phone, the GP Practice agrees to adhere to the following:-

1. Your mobile phone number will only be used by the GP Practice and will not be passed to any other parties.

2. If at any time you would like to opt out of the above service, please make a personal request to the GP Practice. You will then be opted out of the service within 48 hours.

You may also like to include your reason for opting out, to help us review and improve the service in future.

3. Your mobile phone number will be used by the GP Practice solely in relation to the healthcare services offered by the GP Practice. You will not be contacted in relation to any other types of products or services.

4. Whilst the GP Practice will regularly check your contact telephone numbers with you, please ensure you make us aware of any changes.

After sending a text message

▦ Think about how to deal with responses

A reasonable time frame within which to respond to patient messages should be set. A reminder sent to a large group of patients can potentially create an influx of calls to the practice & capacity to resource this should be considered. Patients' expectations need to be managed.

▪ Use delivery receipt functionality

Delivery receipt functionality is common in most SMS messaging utilities. Although a receipt does not show if the intended recipient has actually read the message, receipt statistics should help the organisation to monitor technical or other problems.

▪ Auditable actions

All outward bound SMS text messages need to be auditable to record:

 a) Which mailbox or device the message was sent from

b) Time and date the message was sent
c) The phone number the message was sent to
d) Copy of the actual content sent

Such data need not be kept for long periods (i.e. no more than six months) but long enough to demonstrate to a patient/employee that an action took place and to be able to undertake monitoring and planning.

Please note this is a working document with suggestions of good practice for SMS use. It may not be completely exhaustive. Guidance may change periodically.

Examples of suggested text messages:

➢ Reminder for appointment on date and time *practice name*. For queries phone xxxxxxxxxxx. Do not reply to this message

➢ Your appointment, Dr Smith is booked, 12.30 6th February at *practice name*

➢ Confirmation of appointment at 11.30 on 6th February at *practice name* with Dr Smith

➢ Confirmation of appointment on 6th February 11.30 at *practice name*

➢ Your results are now with your doctor. Contact your practice at xxxxxxxxxxxx

➢ Your results have been received. No action required

➢ Your results are now available. A follow up is not required

Tip! You could reduce the number of characters. For instance, write "MC" instead of "Medical Centre".

Tip! It may be possible to shorten the session holder name on an appointment reminder, by using the short form "Dr Initial & Surname"

Tip! Using a URL in a text message can reduce the word count within a text

Follow these tips for effective patient messaging and best practice.

Download the poster, ask questions and share tips on your CCG extranet.