

Small changes in the short term... big changes in the long term?



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Saving time is an aspect that those running their own businesses often fail to consider. All physiotherapists are happy to spend their time talking to, and treating, their patients, rather than writing, filing and searching for records. Technology can help free up time for this aspect of the business to enable you to concentrate on the part which is most important to you and keeps your patients returning.

Introduction

There's never been a more relevant time for clinics to increase their efficiency, reduce costs, enhance patient satisfaction and identify areas for improvement. The time spent writing patient notes at the end of a treatment may not seem long, but how many patients do you see each day? Each month? Each year? How many seconds or even minutes does it take to locate patient records and treatment histories?

Here are some answers to the most frequently asked questions by those considering a practice management software (PMS) package to help streamline their practice.

Q How can I save money in my clinic?

A It is interesting that this is top of the list of questions! While there is no easy, one paragraph answer, I hope that the responses to some of the questions here will help to address this first one.

One consideration is that, to save money, we need to invest wisely. It may feel counterintuitive to suggest spending money to save it, but making a sound investment in technology will be the cornerstone of saving money in your business. Whatever the size of your practice, it is essential to consider:

- the cost of your investment
- what you will get in return
- how your investment will work for you and your clinic
- whether your investment is fit for purpose, not only for today, but in the future and in the context of your clinic and the marketplace.

Q How can I save time in my clinic?

A Are your phones ringing off the hook? Do you spend hours searching for patient notes? Do you spend evenings invoicing or chasing payments? Are you actually spending less time with your

patients and more on admin? Are you working 18 hours a day? If your answer to most, or all, of these questions is "yes", PMS can offer the following solutions.

- Electronic storage of patient notes: you will no longer waste time hunting for patient notes in a filing cabinet. Electronic notes are easily accessible and legible.
- Invoicing and payment records: a major drain on a clinician's time is the administration required in getting paid, especially where insurance groups and referral companies are involved. With PMS you can automatically create invoices and reports that will help you manage the finances of your business and speed up the invoice and payment cycle.
- For the lone practitioner, or for peak periods on your reception, PMS can link to a remote reception service that will answer your phone and make appointments that will be linked directly to your diary.

Q How can I enhance patient care?

A The primary concern of every practitioner is the welfare of their patients. The time-saving aspects of PMS that help with the efficiency of your administration processes will enable you to focus more fully on your patients.

Another factor to consider is that patients are becoming more sophisticated. From the initial injury or condition, through treatment and on to discharge, patients expect a high level of service and the internet means they are used to accessing services, such as online booking facilities and around the clock helplines on demand.

Patients are also keen to know the likely outcome of their treatment. With PMS, data can be collected on your clinic's outcome measures for certain conditions, such as low back pain, enabling you to answer the questions many patients now ask, such as: "What percentage of patients who came to you with back pain were significantly improved, and after how many treatments?"

Q How can I improve my diary and appointment setting?

A Diary screens in PMS systems are clear and legible. The majority can also be accessed in a variety of ways, giving the busy practitioner maximum flexibility. No more bits of paper with random details scribbled down floating around your desk!

Q What about record-keeping?

A As mentioned previously, recording patient notes electronically ensures they are legible, something that is not always the case with handwritten notes. This can be important when records need to be accessed by fellow practitioners, or supplied to an authorised third party.

Many practitioners have concerns about switching to electronic notes. However, the process is easier than many envisage, and the fact that electronic storage is, increasingly, a safer environment than a traditional filing cabinet means that, once they have done so, few look back.

For those who are yet to be convinced, here are some of the benefits of recording your patient notes electronically:

- where a patient is seeing more than one medical professional, electronic notes can be shared more efficiently
- electronic notes alleviate the problem of illegible handwriting and can ensure that language is less ambiguous
- electronic notes require verification or validation rules to be followed, thereby reducing the instances of missing or incomplete information
- copying and transmitting whole, or individual, sections of records is easier
- no bulky files to store, so less space required for cabinets
- no wear and tear occurs in records that are regularly accessed
- records are protected from accidental damage, e.g. fire or water damage
- records can be located chronologically and alphabetically
- where required, clinicians can access patient notes simultaneously.

Q How easy is "paperless"?

A Paperless practice is something that many clinics dream of. Moving over to electronic records is the start of this process and many clinics are making significant progress towards this goal.

The journey to a paperless clinic often starts with a single aim; a decision to send all invoices electronically to save on printing, envelopes and stamps. This could reduce the cost by £1 an invoice, which soon adds up. A clinic can also cut down on paper and admin time by receiving, and reconciling, invoices electronically.

The switch to a software programme should come with the benefit of a support team who will answer any queries in the initial set-up stages and continue their customer care with regular updates in line with developments in your profession.

Q Can technology encourage patient compliance?

A There are a number of software applications available that provide exercise prescription to patients, many of which include access to dedicated websites and increasingly popular links to video demonstrations. These applications also enable the practitioner and patient to monitor progress, which can also improve compliance.

Management software can also help your clinic encourage and improve patient compliance by reducing the number of cancelled appointments. Automatically generated text reminders have shown, in colloquial evidence, to reduce cancellations by up to 40%.

Q How do I choose the best practice software for me?

A A lot depends on the size of your practice. If you are a lone practitioner working from home, the best starting point is to find out what your friends or colleagues in a similar position use. It might be that a free diary manager is sufficient to maintain your appointments and contain basic patient data. These applications can be found by searching the internet and can be a really cost effective way to getting started.

As a practice grows, demands on the practitioner's time, both as a clinician and business owner, often requires them to start investigating more complex management systems, simply because they need the help.

The transition to a medium sized practice is usually where the greatest demands are made and the longer the decision to move to a PMS is left, the more difficult the transition can become. A specialist provider should have the experience to help you through the transition and recommend a system that will run all aspects of your clinic now and anticipate your future requirements.

Although the term multi-clinic practices might suggest the busiest, and therefore in need of more functions from a PMS, this isn't always the case. This type of clinic is often more in need of a really good diary management system that will run several diaries at the same time without double-booking or appointment errors.

Practices that run on the scale of national chains tend to require management software that is scaled up from the medium practice, often incorporating more complex reporting for contracts. By the time a practice gets to this stage, it is essential to have established processes and confidence in the chosen PMS.

Q What if I choose not to computerise my clinic?

A While it may seem that there's no immediate downside to keeping a paper-based system, it should be remembered that every patient who enters your clinic will generate a paper trail and administration process that, over time, will just get bigger and become more cumbersome.

Apart from this obvious downside, when space is at a premium for many clinics, practitioners who decide not to engage in technology will find that they lose out on benefits such as:

- efficient diary management
- enhanced patient communication
- better organised staffing options
- the flexibility to access data anywhere
- effective invoicing.

The necessity to generate service level agreements and reports, such as key performance and outcome measures, could mean that the clinician without PMS, and therefore the ability to run such reports at a click of a button, will lose out on contracts with third party referrers, as intermediaries increasingly require these details to be supplied on demand.

Also, the government has made a recommendation to the NHS that all patient records are to be electronic by 2018. It is advisable that the modern private practice should aim to beat this deadline.

Q How do I incorporate technology and still maintain communication with my patients?

A Some may feel that, as interaction with the patient is a key part of their recovery, a computer screen will get in the way of the consultation process and, therefore, a practitioner will lose the ability to build that very important rapport. While there is that risk if the practitioner places the desk between themselves and the patient, in reality the time spent in an initial consultation should allow the required information to be captured, and still establish a client / clinician relationship, particularly if the PMS system is configured correctly as it should actually speed up note-taking.

If you really are unsure about taking notes by computer, ask yourself this question? Do you write your notes without looking at the paper you are making them on?

Most professionals today take notes during consultation electronically and people have come to expect it from modern businesses using the latest technology.

Q What does the future hold?

A The future for all successful businesses, of any type and size, is the technology that will help streamline the administration processes required for their day-to-day running. It goes without saying, then, that the more efficient your clinic is, the more time you will have to spend with your patients and on generally improving the customer side of your practice. **Small changes in the short term can lead to big changes in the long term;** whether it is changing the way you deal with billing or employee welfare, or simply updating the way you manage appointments.

The key to the successful business is, as it has always been, one that makes technology work for them.

About the author

Jeremy is the Clinical Executive Officer for Blue Zinc IT Ltd. Over the years he has travelled around the UK and abroad working with a wide range of clinics and hospitals from small start-ups to national chains. He uses his combination of clinical knowledge and business background to help clinics implement practice management software into their practices, design and manage change and create effective training solutions for staff.

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