Email as an Encumbrance to Physician-Patient Communication

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Disclosures

- No disclosures
Introduction

- Patients frequently express an interest in utilizing email to communicate with their healthcare providers.¹
- The primary concerns of physicians regarding email communication are the following:
  1. Lack of security measures in sending/receiving emails
  2. Increased time commitment and effort required by doctors to read and respond to emails
  3. Risk and liability stemming from miscommunication or misunderstanding of vital information
  4. Likelihood of patients to consult via email for trivial issues
  5. Increased possibility of crucial information to get inadvertently lost within the volume of emails that flood a physician’s inbox.
Methods

- To quantify the number of emails delivered to an account that both patients and university members had unrestricted access to, a single university based physician tracked emails received during the 2013 calendar year.

- Emails were divided into seven categories: Informational, Academic, Advertisement, Organization/Department/University, Mission Critical, Personal, and Patient. Informational emails provided general organizational information.

- Total time spent reading was recorded in minutes. Total time responding to emails was not included.
Results

- In 1 year, 9102 emails were read by the physician with an average of 25 emails per day.
- A total of 823 (9%) emails were directly sent by patients. The total time spent reading emails was 5 days, 7 hours and 24 minutes. The mean weekly reading time was 2 hours and 27 minutes.
- Organizational/Departmental/University emails account for 29.32% of received emails, averaging 8 emails per day. Informational, Advertisement, Academic and Personal emails represent 22.41% (6.3 per day), 15.10% (2.7 per day), 9.09% (4.4 per day), and 3.85% (1.3 per day) respectively. Patient emails and Mission Critical emails were grouped together because both categories contain vital information relating to patient care. Collectively, these categories represented 8.13% of the total emails.
Conclusion

- General email is not an effective means of streamlining physician-patient communication.

- Non-essential emails, which represent a majority of incoming messages, decrease the productivity of physicians and prevent them from responding to urgent messages in a timely manner.
  - Additionally this creates the chance for critical patient information to get lost with the volume of received emails. This could be detrimental to patient care and satisfaction.

- A recently instated portal that allows patients to send non-urgent messages to their physicians has been useful to facilitate conversation. Encouraging patients to utilize such portals and taking steps to reduce the amount of unnecessary emails in the physicians general email inbox can drastically improve patient-physician communication.