The Medical Clinic of North Texas (MCNT) has long used technology to facilitate better communication among its 43 multi-specialty practices in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. In 2000, it implemented the integrated NextGen® Ambulatory EHR and NextGen® Practice Management platform to help effectively manage clinical information. A few years later, the practice sought the same level of efficiency for its patient communications.

An analysis of MCNT’s business operations revealed that staff was spending a majority of their time responding to more than 80,000-100,000 incoming patient phone calls each month. The result was an inefficient and unsatisfactory patient communication strategy.

Integration of the NextGen® Patient Portal into MCNT’s existing NextGen® technology suite was the next step in its efforts to promote dynamic, interactive patient/provider communications geared at enhancing productivity, increasing staff/patient satisfaction, and improving patient care.

- Enables secure, online appointment requests and prescription renewals
- Facilitates online payments to reduce days in A/R and decrease bad claims
- Simplifies administrative tasks, including patient statements, reminders, and more
- Integrates with NextGen® product suite to enable real-time clinical and administrative workflow

Direct functionality within EHR workflow; no need for providers to alter daily activities to check patient messages

Real-time clinical workflow among practices and patients

Efficient, cost-effective method for sending lab results, patient statements, medical forms, and school/work forms

Enhanced ability to meet Meaningful Use and earn ARRA incentives

Improved opportunity to achieve patient-centered care requirements
Easing information flow

In April 2009, MCNT began implementation of the NextGen Patient Portal. Although it evaluated one other online patient communication product, the practice favored smooth integration with its existing EHR. “No other product gave us the critical ability to document directly in the patient chart, or send information right from the patient chart,” says Yerrid.

“Direct functionality within NextGen workflow was also very important,” he adds. “We had a problem with the previous product because most of our office staff do not work in email all day.” Requiring providers to check email every so often could prove detrimental to patient care, MCNT found. In a few instances, patients chose to email their providers about critical health issues rather than call.

Now, with the Patient Portal, nearly all patient information requests and questions are routed through the workflow function of the EHR and handled electronically. Physicians can respond to patient messages at any time, and effortlessly attach lab results and other data to those messages. They can quickly and easily communicate with patients directly, and within workflow, thereby improving patient care and satisfaction. No more dictating messages for nurses to convey.

The technology eliminates the need to:

- Relay messages back and forth among staff members and patients
- Spend time responding to long lists of phone messages
- Work late just to answer phone calls
- Print, fold, stamp, and mail result cards and other correspondence

“Before NextGen Healthcare had a patient portal, we tried using a third-party provider,” says Chief Information Officer Mike Yerrid. “It was our first attempt at online patient communications, but the company was acquired and the product was discontinued,” Yerrid explains.

So MCNT searched for a new solution. Like countless practices nationwide, patients who wanted to talk with their providers dialed the front desk, where calls were screened and sent to the appropriate appointment staff, nurse, or medical assistant.

Rarely did patients speak directly with physicians; most requests and responses were relayed through staff. With normal lab or test results, for example, letters were generated by the EHR, printed, folded, and mailed. Nurses called patients to discuss abnormal results.

Not surprisingly, the process proved unsatisfactory and expensive. Nurses and patients lost valuable time “playing phone tag.” MCNT spent about $9,000-$10,000 every month to mail 18,000-20,000 lab cards, which took anywhere from three days to 14 days to reach recipients. After a business analysis revealed staff spent a majority of their time each month responding to roughly 80,000-100,000 incoming phone calls, MCNT knew it needed a better way to communicate with patients.
Offering patients more complete data access

While the transition to the Patient Portal wasn’t difficult, “it’s always challenging to change the way you communicate,” says Yerrid. Initially, getting physicians and patients alike to embrace the new communication technology centered on the ability to send and retrieve lab results in a timely manner.

Patients at MCNT appreciate that the portal provides access to all of their test and lab results, instead of only the abnormal results. They also respond to the convenience of having visit summaries, immunization forms, “return to school/work” forms, and other documents delivered securely through the portal instead of in paper form.

About 20 percent of the practice’s 250,000-300,000 active patients already have enrolled in the portal, with more expected as MCNT gains the ability to let patients schedule their own appointments and securely retrieve their medical records.

Increasing efficiency, improving patient service

Best of all, perhaps, is the ability MCNT now has to track message flow so that none inadvertently fall through the cracks. Task groups created within NextGen® Ambulatory EHR and NextGen® Practice Management and controlled by each individual office—ensure an appropriate staff member always responds to messages. Nightly automated reports show any messages not answered within 24 hours.

In addition, physicians can retrieve prescription refill requests from the portal and send them to the pharmacy—which helps fulfill the e-prescribing requirements necessary to obtain incentive payments.

Still, Yerrid emphasizes that it takes initial effort to sell patients on the benefits they’ll receive from the portal technology. MCNT has accomplished this by:

• **Motivating staff to enroll patients.** Office posters and buttons encourage patients to discuss the features and benefits of the portal with staff and physicians. Practice-wide contests celebrate those staff members who enroll the most patients.

• **Monitoring the percentage of patients that fully enroll.** It’s easy to hand patients the enrollment instructions; it’s harder to ensure they take the few easy steps necessary to enroll. MCNT sends reminder emails and new security tokens to those patients who desire enrollment, but did not complete the process.

• **Inspiring physicians to initiate communication.** Some physicians encourage enrollment by logging in patients while still in the exam room, and allowing them to enroll while awaiting other services. But even more important, says Yerrid, is getting physicians to start the online conversation. “Even if physicians just send lab results or a brief follow-up message through the portal, that’s when patients really see the power of the tool,” he observes.

MCNT remains in the forefront of practices using online technology to facilitate more efficient, patient-centered communication. “Our goal was to be more efficient with our staff time, to provide better service, and to offer more complete information to our patients,” says Yerrid. With the NextGen Patient Portal, MCNT confidently delivers on that goal.