

HEALTHCARE

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Speaking the Same Language:

Writing Outpatient Clinic Letters to Patients

Doctors Should Write Letters to Patients in Plain Language

The benefits of writing letters directly to patients, instead of sending them a copy of letter written to their GP have long been recognized. Writing directly to patients also reduces communication barriers and improves relationship between patient and doctor. However, outpatient clinic letters are notoriously difficult to understand as doctors employ complex medical jargons, causing confusion and anxiety among patients.

This edition of Health Management Bulletin explores some practical tips to help and guide healthcare professionals in writing a letter to their patients.



STRUCTURE & CONTENT

- The letter should be used to further explain information shared during a consultation.
- The letter shouldn't be used as a mean of communication to break upsetting news to the patient.
- Email address and phone number can be included to allow the patient and GP to ask follow up questions and discuss further options.



CLARITY & READABILITY

- Try to increase the letter's readability by:
- Removing redundant words, such as actually and really.
- Using short sentences and sticking to one topic per paragraph.
- Using simple English rather than medical jargons, such as kidney instead of renal.
- Explaining acronyms.
- Using English instead of Latin. For example, twice daily instead of B.D. (bis in die).
- Using images, such as charts and diagrams, instead of words to explain the significance of test results.



STYLE & GRAMMAR

- Depending on the content discussed and the relationship with the patient, information can be presented either formally or directly.
- Doctors should refrain from imposing their point of view when describing patient's emotions.
- For instance, doctors can soften the impact of potentially sensitive information by using a distant and noncommittal style.
- Example: The examination results suggest that you have Parkinson's disease.
- A more direct approach can be used to recommend treatments.
- Example: Please increase the dose of water tablets to 80mg daily.
- Avoid stigmatizing and easily misinterpreted words. For example:
- Instead of acute use sudden or short-term
- Instead of 'chronic' which patients may interpret as 'really bad' use 'longstanding'



CONSENT & CONFIDENTIALITY

- Patient's verbal permission should be requested before writing a letter.
- Children under the age of 16 can give their own permission to be treated if they are believed to have fully understood the treatment.
- For children or people who lack the capacity to understand, doctors may write to the parents or guardians. A separate, simple letter can be written to the patient.
- Never send the letter electronically without the patient's permission.

Reference: CNA Hardy

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