MANAGING PATIENT APPOINTMENTS AND REDUCING NO-SHOW

A patient appointment is a scheduling process where a doctor reserves a specific time slot to see a patient. When further examination is necessary after the first visit, the doctor arranges a follow-up appointment for the patient to return; this is known as an appointment. Doctors do this to monitor patients' progress after initial treatment, and then they take time to examine the patient and exchange information. Due to the high number of patients requiring specialized treatment, the few available specialists develop clear appointment schedules in consultation with the patients. A major challenge for doctors is patient 'no-shows'—when patients miss appointments without notifying the provider.

We are going to discuss the causes of no-show amongst patients, then explore ways in which doctors and health centres can manage patient appointments and reduce no-shows. Below is the discussion on the major causes of No-show.

Appointment Lead Time. This is the period between the initial meeting of the doctor and the patient and the scheduled date for the future appointment. When patients meet the doctor for the first time and a subsequent appointment is needed, the doctor suggests a future date for the patient's return. This is determined by various factors, including the doctor's schedule, hospital policy, or the condition being examined. The appointment lead time is a major factor contributing to No-shows. Research indicates that the longer the lead time, the higher the likelihood of a No-show. Extended lead times caused by scheduling can lead to patients forgetting their appointments. Patients may return to their daily routines and forget about the appointment.

Waiting time(Time of assigned appointment). Most hospitals have a policy on appointments and often communicate with the patients long after they have left the hospital premises. The method of communication, such as mobile text or alert, may be used to affect this. Just like

appointment Leadtime, waiting for a communication from the hospital about the next appointment may lead to a No-show. Appointment communication from the hospital that takes over ten days is often considered ineffective, as many patients prefer instant communication for their next appointment to help reschedule their different engagements during that period. Once the patient leaves the hospital without a communication on the next appointment, they tend to go ahead and plan for their subsequent days, which might clash with the appointment date communicated. Once they have planned for future activities like traveling or work, the probability of No-show will be high if the dates clash with their already set plans.

Preceding appointments – past no-show, explain future no-show; Patients with records of no show are most likely to repeat the same in the future. This might be caused by the same factors that we have already discussed above. Factors such as longer lead time and waiting time may cause a patient to perennially not show up for doctor's appointments. Most hospital that keeps patients' records could easily note this. The more data the hospital has about a patient's previous record, the clearer the prediction of future behaviour.

Bad weather: Rural areas with unpredictable weather conditions could hinder movements, hence cause a No-show. Regions susceptible to severe weather, including Storm Haven Valley, Mud Creek Township, and Misty Pine rural areas, may encounter conditions that render roads impassable and limit access to hospitals. In such places, people hibernate during winter, which means a lot of activities are suspended. A doctor's appointment that falls in such a period will not be honoured

Cost of transportation/Service cost; Distance to medical facilities will mean additional cost incurred by the patient. Patients from a poor background may lack frequent transportation costs to the hospital. This is usually in rural setups where the patients would only attend the first

appointment but fail to show up for the subsequent appointments due to the cost associated with transport, especially where the medical facility is far.

Language barrier: Rural communities may not come for subsequent clinic appointments due to language barriers. Doctors' instructions given in a language that is not native may not be understood; the chances for misinterpretation would be high. The patients from a rural setup without formal education may lack understanding of the language being spoken, especially if it's not the local language. Dates set by doctors may either be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Lack of urgency and responsibility; Disease in its earlier stages may not have strong symptoms and may not cause discomfort. This may lead to a lack of urgency from the patients when required to come back for another appointment. People tend to take appointments seriously when the illness causes discomfort and may ignore it if its effects are not being felt; hence, Doctors' instructions for future appointments may be ignored. Patients who need assistance from other people may also be affected by a lack of responsibility from the person meant to assist them to the hospital. This mostly affects disabled persons; those with responsibility to take them to the hospital may have their own engagement and lack the sense of responsibility or urgency. A doctor's scheduled appointment with a disabled person mostly results in a no-show unless they are assisted, and the assistant is committed to it.

Scheduling-related issues: Another big cause of No-show arises due to scheduling-related issues. Poor scheduling by the hospital of medical facilities often leads to a clash in dates or patients. Due to high numbers in a hospital and few specialists, getting scheduling correct is very important to avoid patients showing up only to find out that there is a mistake in scheduling. This kills the morale of the patients and may cause them to miss subsequent appointments if confidence is not restored. This mainly occurs in facilities that use automated systems for scheduling patients; system breakdown may mess up the appointment schedule,

affecting patients who may show up on a date that isn't correct, and miss out on the correct appointment date.

Insurance type and coverage; Patients under medical care may be affected by the insurance conditions and mandates. Most insurance companies give a limit on the usage of the medical cover under different circumstances. A patient may receive a doctor's appointment, but their access could be restricted by a set condition by the insurer. Most insurance companies give a cap on the amount that can be used for consultations; hence, frequent appointments by doctors may not be covered, which leads to no-shows at the doctor's appointments.

The above causes have increased no-show incidences in health facilities, causing a huge alarm. Health care officers and other related professionals have highlighted the impact this has caused on both the patients and hospitals. Amongst the effects are.

Higher admissions to Emergency rooms. The essence of patient appointments is for the doctor to assess patients' progress, to see if there is any change in the patient's condition or not. Condition improvement may signal that the medication is taking effect, while a worsening condition may necessitate the doctor to further investigate the condition and advise a change in medication. When a patient doesn't show up, a deteriorating condition may necessitate the patient to be put in emergency room. If the patient showed up early as advised, the situation could be managed by further investigation of the condition or a change of medication; this would not lead to higher admission to the Emergency room. Research has shown that most admission to the Emergency room is usually caused by patients skipping regular doctor appointments and only appear when it's an emergency case.

Longer waiting times for appointments. Patients who don't honour appointments with doctors lead to rescheduling of the appointment; this means that the appointment will be pushed further. Most hospitals system cancels all appointments that have not been honoured, which

means that any patients who didn't honour the appointment will have to book the appointment afresh. This cycle leads to longer waiting times for appointments. The longer waiting process may have consequences for the patient.

Loss of revenues; Hospitals incur a lot of revenue loss in unfulfilled appointments by patients who don't show up for their appointments with the doctor. Doctors allocated that time are usually paid irrespective of whether the patient came or not; for them they reported to work. Appointment is paid for by the patients; No-show therefore greatly affects the income flow of the hospital. The hospital budget for such activity is also affected; many departments are usually involved in patient appointments, especially critical patients who would need to be examined by different departments within the hospital. The cost implication will cut across the relevant department.

Discontinued care process. Critical medical care patients who miss a doctor's appointment would disrupt the care process; Medical conditions that need continuous check-ups are necessary to assess the progress of the patients. Diseases such as Cancer Often need ongoing treatment and monitoring for recurrence or progression, especially in long-term survivorship care. No-show affects these patients so much, it might lead to a high admission rate to the emergency room.

Every problem must have a solution; Health practitioners have researched ways to manage no-shows. Every health centre has its own strategies for sorting this out. We will discuss the most common strategies that cut across all the health centers. Some of the strategies are.

Shorten the waiting time.

Shortening the waiting time has a higher chance of increasing the attendance rate of doctors' appointments. A week or two would be ideal for a waiting lead time. That's because the idea is still fresh in the patient's mind, and the concentration would not be deterred when the waiting

time is short. Study shows that the shorter the waiting period, the higher the rate at which patients will come back for the appointments. This is not true when the waiting time is long; the effects are opposite as discussed above. A hospital that experiences a high rate of no-shows should consider this strategy.

Adding automatic reminders

Human nature is very forgetful; a patient with other unrelated commitments may tend to forget the doctor's appointment, especially when it's not critical. Most such patients recall the doctor's instructions only after it's too late, or forget them completely. Many hospitals are implementing this strategy, adding an automatic reminder to their system to alert patient of their appointments. Automated reminders such as Email, SMS, and voicemail are most effective; these reminders should include a clear message with appointment details, location, and instructions to confirm, reschedule, or cancel if necessary. These reminders should also be sent a few days before the appointment date to give the patient time to adjust their schedule if needed. Multiple reminders should be sent to ensure they are noticed. This strategy has proven to be effective.

Establish a separate cancellation phone line.

Making it easy for a patient to reschedule or cancel an appointment altogether reduces the chances of last last-minute No-show. Some patients may miss appointments due to other commitments; this should not be viewed as a refusal, but rather as a need to reschedule. The hospital should provide an easy online portal where patients can easily reschedule or cancel their appointments. The cancellation should also provide a reason behind the cancellation. This may give good feedback to the hospital on how to adjust the appointments to avoid subsequent cancellation, especially if the reasons are hospital-related.

Financial penalties

Introduction of financial penalties for no-show would increase patients' commitment and reduce the no-show rate. Patients will try to avoid such penalties and may work on honouring the appointment. The penalties should include both cancellation of the appointment and the last-minute cancellation. The policy should be well communicated to the patients so that they are well-informed. Such communications should be displayed in the form of posters at the entrances, website pages, and at the portal where the patients would log in to book an appointment. Such strategies have proved to work over time. Patients who know the implications of not showing up for an appointment after booking will commit to it, reducing no-shows.

Using Electronic Health Records to build a prediction model

Studies have shown that patients who don't show up previously are highly likely not to show up subsequently. Hospitals should maintain comprehensive records of their patients, which they can then use to develop personalized models for everyone. Findings from the model would be the best feedback to the hospitals, helping them to give emphasis to patients with poor records on honouring doctors' appointments. Such patients would need to be constantly reminded of the upcoming appointment.

Develop a strategy to reduce anxiety, fear, and daurophobia in patients undergoing any type of examination.

Hospitals should develop strategies to reduce anxiety, fear, and daurophobia in patients undergoing any type of examination. This can be done through patient education and communication, where the doctors explain the examination process step-by-step before and during the procedure to demystify it and reduce fear of the unknown. Doctors can also use visual aids, models, or videos to educate patients about the procedure in a clear, non-threatening way. Patients should be encouraged to ask questions and express their concerns openly. This

builds trust and reduces anxiety. There should also be a pre-visit for such patients to enable the doctors to provide informational materials ahead of the appointment to prepare patients mentally, for example, encourage hydration and skin care if blood draws are involved, to ease physical discomfort, and also suggest regular exercise and good sleep before examination days to reduce baseline anxiety.

Conclusion

In conclusion, having a comprehensive approach to managing patients' appointments would significantly reduce no-show cases. Strategies such as shortening the waiting time, adding automatic reminders, establishing a separate cancellation phone line, imposing Financial penalties, using Electronic Health Records to build a prediction model, and developing a strategy to reduce anxiety, fear, and daurophobia in patients undergoing any type of examination would significantly enhance efficiency in the hospitals. Hospitals and medical centers should also ensure they create a healthy relationship with the patients and provide patient satisfaction.