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2 – Communicating with Patients

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This presentation, from Western Australian GP Dr Michael Jones, was aimed at encouraging GPs to use a practice newsletter. The talk illustrated the benefits, to both patients and doctors, of using this form of communication. The speaker reminded the audience that “doctor” used to mean “teacher” and that GPs need to focus on their role as educators about health, as well as dealing with the specific issues raised at any given consultation.

In 1991, frustrated by some of his patients making unwise decisions based on what they had read in the popular media, or seen on TV, Dr Jones decided to produce a newsletter for the patients of his practice. The purpose of the newsletter would be to give patients accurate information on topical medical issues, remind them about preventative health matters, and give general advice about nutrition and other health-related topics. At the same time, the newsletter would keep them informed about current activities in the practice, such as details of new doctors, practice policies, staff leave, etc.

He rapidly realised the enormity of this task and hit on the idea of producing a ‘generic’ newsletter which could then be personalised for individual subscribing doctors or practices. As a result, the concept of the practice newsletter ‘Your Doctor’ was born. With the help of an experienced journalist, Dr Jones produced the first edition in February 1992. It is a monthly 4 page A4 newsletter (one page of A3 paper folded once) with articles of general medical interest, plus reminders about preventive health measures such as pap smears, mammograms and immunisations. One segment – Good Health on the Menu – contains nutritional advice plus a recipe relevant to that month’s topic.

Areas on the front and back pages are left blank in the initial print run and then overprinted with information provided by the individual subscribing practice. Practices pay a fee which depends upon the number of copies required. The practice can change the content of its personalised section each month at no extra cost. The concept was promoted to GPs as a useful tool, benefitting both patients and doctors. Patients benefit from getting reliable information from a source they trust – their family doctor.

Doctors benefit because in the competitive small-business environment of Australian general practice, where patients are free to see GPs from any practice, patient loyalty is critical for financial survival. Patients appreciate their doctor doing that little-bit-extra to keep them informed and healthy.

Patients want:

- Factual, authoritative information
- Both sides of the story
- Language they can understand

Doctors need to:

- Show that they care
- Tell patients about themselves and the services they provide
- Make patients feel they ‘belong’

Using the newsletter:

1. Hand it to patients
2. Keep it topical
3. Include personal bits and pieces

