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**Practice Communication Policy on
Telephone calls and electronic communication**

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Our practice manages telephone calls, telephone messages and electronic messages from other medical facilities and patients. The practice has a policy in place to ensure that staff and patients are aware of the communications policy at Emerald Medical Centre.

Policy

Emerald Medical Centre endeavours to provide patients with timely advice about their clinical care via the telephone as a primary point of contact. The urgency of a patients needs are determined promptly and handled appropriately. We aim to communicate effectively over the telephone and use simple, straight forward language that is easy to understand. It is imperative that we check to see that patients have understood what has been said to them during the phone call to avoid miscommunication.

Electronic communication, such as email and fax, is another useful and alternative point of access for our patients when contacting the practice. Patients have the option to contact or be contacted by our practice through electronic means such as email or fax. Patients must agree to the use of electronic forms of communication by signing a patient consent form. They are also informed of the associated risks and potential breaches of privacy and confidentiality which may occur when using electronic forms of communication. Our practice adheres to the Australian Privacy Principles (APP's), The Privacy Act 1988 and Our practice aims to ensure that all messages are responded to in a timely manner.

At Emerald Medical Centre, our aim is to facilitate optimal communication opportunities with all patients. Patients who do not speak or read English, speak another language or have special communication needs are always offered the choice of using the assistance of a language service to communicate with the GP's or clinical team members

Procedure:

Communicating by telephone

All telephone calls are answered by a member of the practice who must adhere to the following guidelines:

- Staff follow the practice booking system for all patient appointments
- Before any calls are placed on hold staff must first ask if the matter is an emergency
- Staff follow the practice triage system for patients requesting urgent appointments
- Staff make sure the patient is correctly identified by using three of the approved patient identifiers (eg: surname & given names, date of birth, address)
- Staff are mindful of confidentiality and the patients right to privacy at all times. No names are openly stated over the telephone within earshot of other patients and/or visitors
- Staff are aware of each Doctors policy on accepting or returning calls

Patients of our practice are able to access a member of our medical or clinical team by telephone to discuss their clinical care. When telephone communication is received, the urgency and nature of the call

is gathered to determine if the call will be transferred immediately or if a message will be taken for the call to be returned. In non-urgent situations, patient calls should not interrupt consultations with other patients. Our practice team members are aware of each practitioner's policy on accepting and returning telephone calls. Patient messages taken for follow-up by a general practitioner or other practice team member are documented for their attention and action or, in their absence, for the designated person who is responsible for that absent team members' workload. This is done via the internal messaging system. Patients are advised through information contained on our website and from the practice team member receiving the call, if a fee will be incurred for the telephone advice to be provided.

All members of the practice team are familiar with each medical and clinical team's policy of receiving and/or returning telephone calls.

A comprehensive telephone answering machine message, both during and outside normal opening hours, is maintained and activated to advise patients of our after-hours care arrangements and the advice to call '000' in an emergency.

All members of the practice team are aware of alternative modes of communication that may be used by patients with a disability or special needs, including the National Relay Service (NRS) for callers with hearing impairments, and Translating and Interpreter Service (TIS) for patients who do not speak the primary language of our practice team. We ensure their use is conducted with appropriate regard for the privacy and confidentiality of health information and that patients are made aware of any risks these modes may pose to the privacy and confidentiality of their health information or any additional out-of-pocket costs, e.g. the requirement for a longer appointment.

When receiving an incoming telephone call, our practice team members follow this procedure:

- Pick up the telephone receiver within three (3) rings
- Answer by stating "Emerald Medical Centre, this is [your name] speaking, how may I help you today?"
- If the caller has not identified themselves – ask their name
- If the call is for an appointment, refer to Policy & Procedure Manual Section 5.2 – Appointments
- If the call is assessed as an emergency or urgent query, refer to the steps outlined in Policy & Procedure Manual Section 5.9 – Medical emergencies and urgent queries
- If the caller requests to speak with a specific general practitioner, refer to the general practitioner's policy on receiving and returning telephone calls
- If taking a message or when assessing the caller's needs, do not hurry the caller - if necessary repeat your questions or re-state the message taken
- Never attempt to diagnose or recommend treatment over the telephone
- Encourage the caller to write down any instructions resulting from the telephone call
- Have the caller repeat any instructions given to assess their understanding of what was said, and
- Ensure the caller's consent is obtained prior to placing them on hold in case the call is an emergency.

A medical file entry or internal message saved to patient file, is used to record all significant and important telephone conversations, including after-hours contact, medical emergencies and urgent queries. The log

records the:

- Name and contact telephone number of the patient/caller
- Date and time of the call
- Urgent or non-urgent nature of the call
- Important facts concerning the patient's condition
- Advice or information received from the general practitioner or other healthcare team member (e.g. nurse), and
- Details of any follow up actions necessary.

Details of telephone or attempted telephone contact with a patient (whether initiated by our practice team or the patient) is recorded in their health record, including the:

- Reason for the contact
- Advice and information given, and
- Details of the outcome of that attempt (e.g. message left on answering machine) where team members have attempted to contact the patient.

Calls on hold

It is important to try to obtain adequate information from the patient/caller to assess whether the call is an emergency before placing the call on hold. If another incoming call registers and no other practice team members are available to answer the incoming call, ask to put the caller on hold or seek to terminate the call with an offer to call them back to continue the discussion. Do not leave the caller on hold for long periods. Return to the caller periodically if there is a significant delay in managing their call (e.g. waiting to transfer the call to another member of the practice team who is not immediately available) to re-confirm the caller remains satisfied to wait or if they would rather a message for a return call be taken. Our practice 'on hold' message provides the advice to call '000' in case of an emergency.

Electronic Communication including email

Our practice is mindful that even if patients have provided electronic contact details, they may not be proficient in communicating via electronic means and patient consent needs to be obtained before engaging in electronic communication. Electronic communication includes email, facsimile and Short Message Service (SMS).

Communication with patients via electronic means is conducted with appropriate regard to privacy.

Our practice's primary reason for communicating electronically to patients is to issue appointment reminders and we verify the correct contact details of the patient at the time of the appointment being made. Whilst not encouraged, our practice allows patients an opportunity to obtain advice or information related to their care by electronic means, but only where the general practitioner determines that a face-to-face consultation is unnecessary and that communication by electronic means is suitable. Our practice will only provide information that is of a general, non-urgent nature and will not initiate electronic communication (other than SMS appointment reminders) with patients. Any electronic communication received from patients is also used as a method to verify the contact details we have recorded on file are correct and up-to-date. Communication with patients via electronic means is conducted with appropriate regard to privacy. Before obtaining and documenting the patient's consent, patients are fully informed of

the risks associated with electronic communication in that the information could be intercepted or read by someone other than the intended recipient. Our practice also has an automatic email response system set up so that whenever an email is received into the practice, the sender receives an automated message reinforcing information regarding these risks. When an email message is sent or received in the course of a person's duties, that message is a business communication and therefore constitutes an official record. Patients are informed of any costs to be incurred as a result of the electronic advice or information being provided, and all electronic contact with patients is recorded in their health record.

Our practice email account for patients and the general public is emclanecove@gmail.com. No consulting or medical advice is given over email; this must be communicated face-to-face by a medical practitioner or other appropriate health professional, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

The practice email account is checked regularly by the receptionist on duty throughout the business day. Email messages are forwarded to the appropriate team member for a response within 24-48hrs.

All members of the practice team are made aware of our policy regarding electronic communication with patients during induction, and are reminded of this policy on an ongoing basis. They are made aware that electronic communications could be forwarded, intercepted, printed and stored by others. Each member of the practice team holds full accountability for emails, and internal messages sent in their name or held in their mailbox, and they are expected to utilise this communication tool in an acceptable manner. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Limiting the exchange of personal messages
- Refraining from responding to unsolicited or unwanted emails
- Deleting hoaxes or chain emails
- Email attachments from unknown senders are not to be opened
- Virus checking all email attachments
- Maintaining appropriate language within electronic communications
- Ensuring any personal opinions are clearly indicated as such, and
- Confidential information (e.g. patient information) must be encrypted.

Emerald Medical Centre uses HotDoc appointment portal messaging to remind patients of their upcoming appointments. No medical or personal identifying information is used in these messages. It is the patients' responsibility to contact the practice and follow up on the message/appointment reminder.

Our practice reserves the right to check an individual's email accounts as a precaution to fraud, viruses, workplace harassment or breaches of confidence by members of the practice team. Inappropriate use of the email facility will be fully investigated and may be grounds for dismissal. The practice uses an email disclaimer notice on outgoing emails that are affiliated with the practice stating:

Warning: The information contained in this email is intended for the named recipient(s) only. It may contain private, confidential, copyright or legally privileged information. If you are not the intended recipient or you have received this email by mistake, please reply to the author and delete this email immediately. You must not copy, print, forward or distribute this email, nor place reliance on its contents. This email and any attachment have been virus scanned. However, you are requested to conduct a virus scan as well. No liability is accepted for any loss or damage resulting from a computer virus, or resulting from a delay or defect in transmission of this email or any attached file.

In the event of an emergency, please call 000 (Triple 0) for urgent care or go to your nearest emergency department.

For medical care after hours, please call 13SICK (13 74 25).

Informing the clinical team of communications

The practice clinical team is informed of all communications which require their attention and action. This communication will be documented in the team members appointment book/screen, patient record and/or Doctors pigeon hole. All significant and important telephone conversations or electronic communications, including after hours contacts, medical emergencies and urgent queries are documented.

The log records:

- Name and phone number of the patient/caller
- Date and time of the call
- Urgency of the call
- Important facts concerning the patients' condition
- The advice or information received from the Doctor
- Details of any follow up appointment

All documented communications are provided to the staff member on the day of receipt and must be responded to within a timely manner (24-48hrs)

Communicating with patients with special needs

A contact list of translator and interpreter services and services for patients with a disability is maintained, updated regularly and readily available to all staff at reception. These include:

- National Relay Service 133 677
- AUSLAN Services 1300 AUSLAN
- Translation and Interpreter Services 1300 131 450

Patient Feedback

If you have suggestions, comments or are unhappy with the service you have received, please contact us in writing or by email. Email: emclanecove@gmail.com, (attention to: Practice Manager) or call **(02) 9420 0222**. Alternatively you can contact AHPRA (Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency) or state health complaints body at Health Care Complaints Commission on (02) 9219 7444.

Document revision information:

Version	Date	Amendment	Author	Approval
1.0	21 April 2024	Initial release	EL	CW
1.1	19 September 2024	Updated	EL	CW