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Video and email communications help increase conversion rates and broaden your patient base.

By Annemarie Mannion
“Telemedicine has grown exponentially over the last 10 years because of advances in technology and some increases in reimbursements,” says Carrie L. Kovarik, MD, a dermatologist with the University of Pennsylvania Health System. “There has been a convenience revolution.” Patient demand is the driving force behind this convenience revolution, says Dr. Kovarik, because people want to see their doctors but often struggle to find the time to travel to appointments. “Patients want to access direct care and this is a new avenue of direct communication from provider to patient,” she says.

In cosmetic medicine, doctors are communicating with and viewing photos of patients by email, and interacting with them via Skype, FaceTime or HIPAA-compliant platforms that enable providers to receive photos, videos and basic medical information over a secure network.

Jonathan Linkous, CEO of the Washington, D.C.-based American Telemedicine Association, agrees with Dr. Kovarik that the use of telemedicine is growing “by leaps and bounds,” he says. “The number of services being offered is increasing, the types of services are increasing and the way they’re being delivered is increasing. Two years ago we estimated that 12 million patients in this country received a telemedicine service. We estimate that will have doubled by the end of this year.”

The Virtual Pre-Consultation
In the highly competitive field of cosmetic surgery, one of the greatest challenges for physicians is how to handle the patient consultation. Free consultations have become the norm, and doctors spend a great deal of time speaking with patients who are, more often than not, unable or unwilling to go through with the procedures for which they seek information.

“The number of patients that come into a plastic surgeon’s office for a consult and end up having the procedure performed is about 36%,” says Gary D. Breslow, MD, a plastic surgeon based in Paramus, New Jersey. “There are a number of reasons why that is: it’s not just that the patient isn’t serious about having surgery or that they’re wasting your time. That number is actually quite small.”

More commonly, he says, patients don’t know which procedure they need. For instance, a patient may come in because she wants breast augmentation, but it turns out she needs a breast lift as well. “They come in, say I don’t want a breast lift and end up leaving,” says Dr. Breslow. “Or they have no idea how much a procedure costs and end up leaving after they realize they can’t afford it. In some cases, they know the cost, but they didn’t know they would have scarring after the procedure. Or they’re not medically clearable for surgery, so there’s a range of reasons why they end up not having the procedure.”

Over the years, physicians have tried different strategies to address these concerns, such as pre-screening patients through a series of questions asked by the front desk staff or charging for consultations to weed out those who are not serious about moving forward. “The problem is, patients see through the pre-screening,” says Dr. Breslow. “And charging for consultations sounds like a great idea, but it’s a barrier that keeps patients from coming to see you, especially if you’re in an area where no one else is charging for consultations.”

In response to what he calls the “consultation conundrum,” he developed Zwivel, a free tool for physicians and patients. Zwivel, which is a widget that appears on the physician’s website, allows patients to fill out a form regarding their desired procedure, budget and timetable for the procedure. The prospective patient can also provide a brief medical history and upload video and images.
The physician can then respond with a video message outlining their treatment recommendations and fees.

“It only takes a few minutes to reply, and I’m actually as happy when a patient doesn’t come in once I’ve made my recommendation as I am when the patient does come in, because it’s saved me an hour of time,” says Dr. Breslow.

Other physicians have created similar protocols in their own offices. Cosmetic surgeon Stephen Park, MD, who is based in Virginia, frequently uses Skype and email to converse with patients. “Telemedicine is probably used on a daily basis in my office through emails and occasionally Skype,” says Dr. Park, president of the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (AAFPRS). “People are sending photos and video. It’s made a world of difference in patient convenience.”

In the early days of Skype, physicians would often schedule live pre-consults with interested patients. But today, providers such as Dr. Breslow and Dr. Park have found that using email communication with video and images is preferable because it allows you to review the information and respond on your own timetable. You also have the ability to get up and walk away if you’re needed elsewhere in the practice.

Elizabeth Arthur, MD, a dermatologist with Helen-dale Dermatology and Medical Spa in Rochester, New York, began offering virtual consultations when some of her tech-savvy patients, who use Skype to connect with far-flung family members, asked to use it for consultations with staff in her office.

Initially, Dr. Arthur handled the Skype pre-consultations. She would have live chats with potential patients in the evening, but she found that this was not a good use of her time. “I found they were often the same people asking the same questions,” she says.

Today, her nurse practitioner handles this area of the practice. She schedules the Skype conversations during slow times in the practice. “She has certain times she likes to do them. Usually times when people don’t want to come in for appointments,” says Dr. Arthur.

There is no fee for a 10-minute pre-consultation. In the past three years the practice has done about 50 Skype consultations and 100% of those individuals have become patients.

The benefit of using Skype, says Dr. Arthur, is that it is convenient for both the patients and the practice, but still allows the practice to build a relationship with prospects. People who Skype in can decide if they feel comfortable with her office. “I also think they like that they already have a familiar face when they walk in the door,” she says.

Dr. Breslow also points to relationship building as a key benefit of video-based pre-consultations. “One of the concerns I hear from doctors is, ‘I like the patients to come into the office because they get to know us. If I