

SMS plan to tackle patient no-shows

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Text messages may hold the key to halving the number of appointment no-shows at Australian hospitals, an innovative study has found.

Researchers at Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne discovered they could cut the number of missed appointments dramatically by sending each patient an SMS three days in advance.

The study, published in the journal Australian Health Review, involved 45,000 patients and reduced no-shows from 20 per cent to just 10 per cent in three months.

It was so successful the hospital implemented it permanently, with study leader Sean Downer saying other medical facilities should use it too.

"Non-attendance is a huge problem for hospitals because it wastes valuable time and resources," said Mr Downer, the hospital's decision support manager.

"If one in five people don't show up then that's one in five people back in the queue that don't need to be there."

Like most hospitals, Royal Children's does not have the resources to phone or send letters to all patients booked in.

Frustrated by the number of missed appointments, Mr Downer implemented an internet-based SMS system which can send up to 1000 messages at once.

"I used to get my exam results SMSed to me from school so I figured it would probably work here too," he said.

"And it does. We send 400 messages a day at the touch of a button so it's pretty nifty."

The hospital pays almost the standard rate of 20 cents a text but Mr Downer said the benefits far outweigh the costs.

"If one new patient shows up for their appointment we get about \$150 which is the equivalent of hundreds of SMSs, so it's well worth the effort," he said.

"And it's obviously keeping the waiting list down too, and you can't really put a price on that."

He believes the system is so effective because "people treat their mobile as a personal tool and have it always on hand".

Encouraged by the success, Mr Downer said he would like to see the system also used to remind patients to take medication and to send test results.

"That might be a while off but I see no reason we couldn't try it," he said.