

Practice Management

A D V I S O R

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Can you use AI in your medical practice?

In November 2022, artificial intelligence (AI) got a lot of attention with the launch of ChatGPT, a “chatbot” developed by OpenAI. Users can converse with the chatbot in a fairly sophisticated way via questions that steer conversations toward answers of any desired type, length, style and format.

Although AI has the potential to transform many fields, including health care, there’s still some controversy about its use. One worry is that AI will eventually eliminate some types of jobs. But the possible positive impact of AI may outweigh this concern and others.

Applications to health care

A 2023 article published in *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence* noted that, though AI has been used for some time in customer support and data management, its use in health care and medical research has been relatively restricted.

In health care, the article suggests, the potential applications range from assistance in selecting research topics to helping professionals in clinical and laboratory diagnosis. But many limitations and ethical problems haven’t yet been resolved — including credibility, plagiarism and potential medico-legal complications. Most problematic, it can give inaccurate and unreliable results.

Even so, using AI might benefit physicians in some areas of health care, including:

- ▶ Integrating basic data and drafting correspondence to, for example, other physicians or insurers (the physician would still need to proofread the results for accuracy),
- ▶ Translating medical jargon for patients,



- ▶ Recording physician-patient conversations and summarizing them into reports,
- ▶ Dictating notes and providing summaries with key details, such as symptoms, diagnoses and treatments,
- ▶ Pulling relevant information from patient records — for example, lab results or imaging reports,
- ▶ Providing conversational approaches to collecting information from patients,
- ▶ Helping with appointment scheduling, and
- ▶ Providing medicine dosage and prescription renewal reminders to patients.

AI also can suggest appropriate treatment options and identify possible drug interactions. In addition, it can assist in data analysis received from patients using wearables, sensors and other monitoring devices. And it may be able to help keep you up to date on new developments in your areas of expertise.

Garbage in, garbage out

It’s also important to keep in mind some of the potential downsides of AI use in health care.

7 best practices for using chatbots in health care

Use of ChatGPT or other artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots is increasing — and that includes in health care. Yet the technology is still evolving. If you decide to use a chatbot as part of your practice's operations, here are seven best practices to consider:

- 1. Identify your goals.** What are you hoping to achieve? For instance, do you want to improve patient communication, streamline administrative tasks or improve quality of care? Your goals will help you determine how to best use a chatbot, or AI in general, in your practice.
- 2. Pick the right version.** ChatGPT is only one type of chatbot, and ChatGPT itself offers different models. Select one that supports your goals.
- 3. Think about data integration.** Ideally, a chatbot should be able to integrate with your existing systems, such as your electronic health record platform and other software, to capture the data it gathers. Are you ready for this?
- 4. Train your chosen chatbot.** Because chatbots use natural language processing, they need to be trained on accurate data specifically related to health care.
- 5. Customize the chatbot to your practice's needs.** Doing so typically requires developing templates for common medical questions, making sure they comply with health care regulations such as HIPAA, and adjusting the chatbot's responses for accuracy.
- 6. Test it out.** Before using the chatbot in the real world, rigorously test it. Evaluate the chatbot through a range of common — and not-so-common — scenarios to make sure it responds correctly and appropriately while maintaining patient privacy.
- 7. Train staff.** Chatbots may seem to operate independently, but it's still essential to teach your staff how to work with them. Everyone must understand the capabilities and limitations of this evolving technology.

Patients almost certainly will try to use chatbots to self-diagnose. This is already a trend with internet searches and platforms such as WebMD. But chatbots that quickly respond to specific requests might make it even more likely patients will use and trust the results — even when they shouldn't. If your patients use a chatbot and mention their findings to you, use your expertise and experience to manage their expectations and express appropriate levels of skepticism in the personal use of AI for medical purposes.

Patients need to understand that how questions are organized and presented to chatbots influences the response. There's a famous computer science term that isn't heard as much these days: garbage

in, garbage out. In short, computers — even AI — can work only with the data received. Chatbots are "trained" by exposing them to various data and scenarios. Invariably, biases and conflicts will be part of both the training and actual use. That's why it remains important that a human being, especially an expert such as a physician or nurse, verifies the results of anything related to health care.

Many possibilities

Currently, it's unlikely that AI tools will entirely replace physicians. But these tools may help create more efficiencies in your medical practice, which may result in cost savings for both you and your patients. Explore the many possibilities carefully. ▶

As medical costs increase, practice costs must come down

PwC's Health Research Institute projected a 7% increase in medical costs for 2024. That's greater than in 2022 (5.5%) and 2023 (6%).

What's driving the increases for health care providers? Inflation, rising wages, rapid technological advancements and a scarcity of clinical workers are just a few of the contributing factors. The cost increases will make it harder for physician practices to maintain profitability, but you can help matters by looking for ways to increase revenue and improve operations.

Keep an eye on revenue

When it comes to increasing revenue, you have two general approaches to consider: see more patients or lower expenses. The latter is usually easier.

To look for ways to cut waste, analyze your practice's workflow. It's easy to get into a "we've-always-done-it-this-way" mindset and simply assume that your practice runs like the proverbial well-oiled machine. However, many physicians find that regularly scheduled workflow analyses — looking at what happens from the minute patients book their appointments to the moment they walk out the door after receiving care — often reveal startling inefficiencies and redundancies that can be caught and corrected.

Are patients spending too much time in reception or in examination rooms waiting for care? Are you, the physician, involved in parts of the workflow that could be handled by other staff? How much time are you spending on notes per patient?

Your staff may have ideas for improving efficiency as well. Identify problematic areas and brainstorm with the relevant employees on how to best resolve the issues. Try out solutions and iterate

from there, making continuous improvement part of your practice culture.

Evaluate your physical space

Are you using your physical space effectively and efficiently? If you have extra room, perhaps you could rent space to a part-time clinician or ancillary service provider, such as a physical therapist or nutritionist.

How can you optimize use of the space? For starters, good interior design can significantly improve the patient experience as well as your staff's working environment. Create a calm, engaging atmosphere with up-to-date décor and artwork. Use warm-colored paint and gentle lighting to reduce patient anxiety. If possible, provide window views of natural settings. Offer easily accessible and *current* informational materials and magazines.

Exam rooms need to be functional, of course, but they can also be welcoming and calming with the right lighting, paint selection and temperature control. Set up exam tables at an angle so there's more wall space for extra seating.

Scrutinize the layout of your practice as well. Consider creating team stations to improve flow. Having



exam rooms close to each team's work area reduces the number of steps team members must take to get to patients, generating incremental time savings that add up over the weeks and months. Also, ensuring staff have line-of-sight to exam rooms allows them to better manage patient activity.

Explore staffing and tech solutions

Given the ongoing clinical staffing shortage, explore the possibility of engaging freelancers for certain tasks. You may be able to find, for example, qualified medical assistants and receptionists via platforms such as Upwork, Fiverr and Hubstaff Talent.

Typically, these "gig workers" will be looking to fill hourly or on-demand roles. Some of them may be college students heading to nursing or medical school who can grow with the practice. Alternatively, you could cross-train staff to handle

tasks that are often overlooked or slow to be completed.

In addition, physicians must use technology strategically to improve the efficiency of practice operations. Doing so may require the practice to not only buy new platforms or software, but also pay for staff training. Whether it's an upgraded electronic health record system, a Voice over Internet Protocol phone system, a new billing and ordering system, or any other type of technology, carefully chosen solutions and effective use is key to cutting costs.

Trim the fat

Naturally, cost-cutting should never compromise the quality of care that your practice provides. But there are usually ways to "trim the fat," improve efficiency, and maintain or even increase profitability. ▶

Fairness in collections: A primer

Over the past few years, the U.S. economy has faced challenges such as a pandemic, a transformed job market, rising inflation and continued economic uncertainty. Although job security has improved, especially in some fields, many people still struggle to pay their medical bills. Medical practices need to be aware of the societal, cultural and insurance issues patients are dealing with to ensure collection practices are fair while also remaining effective.

Causes to analyze

There are many root causes to collection problems. Some patients may be unhappy with the outcome of an appointment or treatment plan and need to discuss the matter before paying. Others may have simply forgotten or misplaced the bill. And still others could be facing unemployment or other

serious personal issues, such as illness or a death in the family.

There's also the possibility that an insurer or employee at your practice has made a billing mistake. Regularly assess your billing policies and procedures to determine whether errors are occurring and at what rate.

Information to provide

To establish a solid baseline for collections, it's important to be transparent about pricing and insurance coverage at the start of treatment. Have conversations upfront with patients about billing, fees and their balances.

To facilitate an informed discussion, you and your staff must have a firm grasp on each patient's



insurance coverage. So, collect and vigilantly update vital patient information such as demographics, insurance provider, deductibles and co-pays. You also may want to ask patients for consent to put their credit cards on file so you can charge them for any amounts remaining after insurer payouts.

Payment programs to offer

Explore the idea of offering payment plans to patients. You can administer such a program internally, though using a third-party provider may be the most effective option. Payment-plan programs typically involve:

- ▶ Establishing written agreements with patients whereby they agree to pay off their balances over stated periods,
- ▶ Creating and distributing printed or electronic statements and bills,
- ▶ Setting up notifications in your electronic health records system to notify staff when payments are due, and
- ▶ Training staff members to make reminder calls to patients who fall behind on their payments.

A third-party provider may simplify program administration, but you'll need to accurately estimate the cost of this service and obtain references from trusted colleagues.

Last resorts to consider

Sometimes turning a bill over to a collection agency is the only way to get a patient's attention.

But exhaust all other options before sending a bill to collections because doing so not only generates ill will with the patient, but also decreases the recoverable amount of the bill. After all, collection agencies usually work on commissions ranging from 10% to 25% — or more — depending on the age and type of debt, and the ease of collection.

If you do engage a collection agency, try to maintain good relations with affected patients. You don't want the agency to antagonize them. When looking for a provider, investigate each one's track record, ask for references and contact other physicians for recommendations. Also, be aware that a collection agency that handles hospital debts often works differently from one that handles physician practices — the ones focusing on hospitals tend to be more aggressive, and physician practices can be more flexible with patients.

To establish a solid baseline for collections, it's important to be transparent about pricing and insurance coverage at the start of treatment.

Finally, if necessary, you can file a civil lawsuit, but this is typically viewed as an absolute last resort. Taking a patient to court could backfire on the practice if the story gets out in the news or on social media — particularly during a time when so many are struggling financially.

Be patient with patients

Your patients might be juggling a myriad of issues and concerns, including how to pay their medical bills. At the same time, your practice is a business that must bring in revenue to remain operational. That said, you may need to adjust your collections approach in response to some patients' circumstances to obtain the best results in the end. ▶

Cultivating both sides of your medical practice

World-class patient care is no doubt the ultimate goal of your practice. But you can't provide excellent care if your practice isn't operating well, too. The business side of your practice must be strong and efficient enough to sustain and support the care you offer patients. The two are intertwined, and you need to cultivate both simultaneously.

The patient experience

Patient care is your primary purpose and, as such, it should be at the heart of your business strategy. Survey patients regularly to determine how they feel about the practice, and what they see as its strengths and shortcomings. For example, if patients complain about having to constantly reexplain certain details about themselves, consider investing in medical customer relationship management software to better track appointment notes as well as patient preferences and interactions.

Developing efficient scheduling practices will help improve the patient experience as well. Long wait times tend to upset patients, leading to negative online reviews and potentially fewer people choosing your practice when they search for a physician on the internet. Analyze the number of patients you're seeing daily and how long you're spending with each. Your goal is to determine whether the number of patients you're scheduling per day is realistic.

Staff satisfaction

If patients are your practice's most valuable asset, figuratively speaking, its second most valuable is your employees. So, carefully and thoughtfully invest the money and time in ongoing professional training and development for you and your staff.

Make continuing education — both medical and business — a priority and part of practice culture. This includes training on not only any hardware or

software the practice uses, but also other relevant topics through webinars, online courses and medical conferences.

In addition, offer competitive pay, benefits and, as much as possible, flexible schedules. Let staff know they're appreciated.

Analytics and improvement

"If you can't measure it, you can't improve it," is a common business adage, often attributed to W. Edwards Deming. Whoever said it first was expressing the simple truth that, to improve something, you've got to know precisely what needs to change and by how much. Stay on top of billing practices and key financial indicators, such as accounts receivables and insurance-claim rejections, which you should evaluate weekly and monthly.

Take a hard look at your practice at least annually and evaluate what's working up to expectations and what you should improve. For example, if you find your inventory isn't keeping up with demand, consider buying inventory management software.

A multifaceted approach

Your medical practice requires constant care to ensure it continues to thrive. A multifaceted approach that addresses all aspects of your operations will keep it thriving over the long term. ■



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