

The physicians at Family Health Center, a large, primary care medical group practice in Baltimore, MD, were dissatisfied with the call coverage they received from hospital operators. These operators did little more than transfer calls to the on-call physician after hours. The center had also received several patient complaints about the perceived rudeness of the operators. The decision was made to adopt an automated answering service, Webley MD After Hours. This case study describes how Family Health Center successfully adopted Webley MD After Hours and in doing so, increased both physician and patient satisfaction.

## Background

Family Health Center is a large non-profit, primary care medical group practice located in Baltimore, MD. The practice handled 31,000 visits a year, including adult medicine, pediatrics, OB/GYN, podiatry, dental care, family planning, outpatient substance abuse detoxification, and HIV case management. The Center typically experienced extremely high call volumes during the day and evening hours. Residents stayed an average of three years at the Center, during which time they gained the skills they needed to start their own practice or join an existing practice.

## The Problem

Physicians at the Family Health Center were dissatisfied with the live hospital operators who provided business hours and after hours call coverage. There were several instances where patients complained about the customer service skills of the call center operators. Physicians also felt that several operators resented taking their calls and relaying messages. Operators did not screen calls but instead transferred calls directly to the on-call physician after business hours.

On-call scheduling was also problematic for the Center. After hours calls were handled by the eight residents and on-call schedules changed frequently. Scheduling errors were common and expected, because of the number of residents involved. Since the existing approach had been in place for many years, it was tolerated despite being sub-optimal for patients, administrators and physicians.

## The Solution

During a monthly management meeting attended by directors, administrators and office managers, one of the Center's administrators brought up the idea of using an automated after hours service, Webley MD After Hours, after hearing that another practice was using it successfully. Management frustration was so high that they felt that the after hours situation "couldn't get any worse." The facility medical director decided to try Webley MD After Hours to see if it could improve after hours call coverage and on-call status management.

The Center had shied away from telehealth because they felt it was too expensive and also inferior to having physicians triage and respond to calls. It was important to the Center that their residents learn how to triage patient calls because of the function of the Center as a training ground for residents.

After adopting Webley MD After Hours, Family Health Center continued to use live operators during the day. After hours, calls were transferred to the Webley MD phone number. Residents were quick to adopt and pick up how to use Webley MD with a one page user guide. New hires were provided with the user guide during their new hire orientation.

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Key Webley MD After Hours features for physicians included:

- Sends notifications to pager, e-mail, cell phone and landline phones.
- Manages physician on-call status by phone
- Call blast transfers incoming calls directly to voice mail or to up to 4 phone numbers at the same time
- Better call screening, with caller ID and the ability of callers to tag messages as urgent

## Patient and Staff Reactions

Residents appreciated Webley MD's ease of use, increased control of their own on call status changes, better call screening and faster access to patient messages. They also preferred the voice messages to the relayed messages; the voice messages allowed them to hear the patient's tone of voice (and infer urgency) and these messages were more accurate than messages relayed by a third party.

In contrast to the old practice where operators once transferred calls directly to the on-call physicians, Webley MD After Hours provided the option of answering calls right away or deferring them to a more convenient time for the on-call physician. Deferring allowed physicians to listen to the patient's message, gather their thoughts, possibly consult an attending faculty member, and then call the patient back with a better response.

For administrators, the reliability and consistency were the key benefits of using Webley MD After Hours. As one administrator put it, "The information gets transmitted accurately [by Webley MD]. I don't even have to think about the phone coverage. It's utterly reliable."

Patients accepted Webley MD After Hours readily. In contrast to the daytime call coverage, there were very few complaints about after hours call coverage. The 2 to 3 complaints a year that were received regarding after hours concerned not being called back.

## Conclusion

In response to patient and staff dissatisfaction to live operators handling incoming calls, Family Health Center made the decision to adopt Webley MD After Hours for after hours call coverage and physician on-call status management. Residents and administrators at Family Health Center rely on Webley MD After Hours and believe that it is perfectly suited for their situation where on-call status schedules change often, the practice experiences high call volumes and coordination by non-automated means is extremely cumbersome and error prone. Residents felt that they were more in control of their own call status and that Webley MD After Hours facilitated their triaging of after hours calls. Administrators were pleased to find a reliable, documentable, cost effective alternative to providing better after hours care.

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