

# 14 tips for urgent communication in the healthcare industry



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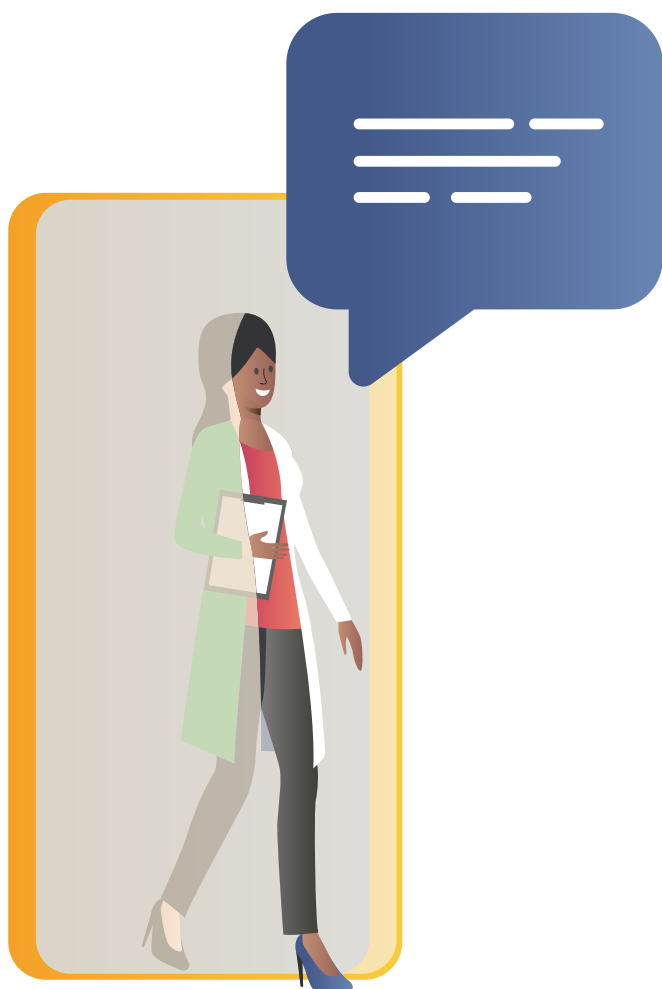
# Introduction

Urgent healthcare communication has gone from an industry-specific concern to making national headlines in less than a year. The recent pandemic has highlighted the subject's importance, especially in rapidly developing situations. For some, it has also highlighted areas for improvement.

Filling communication gaps should be a constant priority, not just in the event of a global health crisis. Some healthcare professionals face hundreds – even thousands – of last-minute, life-or-death communication challenges on a daily basis. If that sounds overwhelming, that's because it is.

For such a daunting problem, the most effective solutions have something very simple in common: preparation. It's a tired phrase, but 'failing to plan' really *does* mean 'planning to fail' in this case. Invest thought, effort (and yes, some money) in your communication processes ahead of time, and you won't have to think about them when lives are on the line.

That's all well and good, but a few stern platitudes about planning wouldn't be very useful on their own. Here's exactly what you should be focusing on when building an urgent communication framework.



# Taking stock

Here's another worn-out saying: you can't improve what you haven't measured. It's worn out for a reason. Before you adopt flashy new communication software or write a slick comms policy, you need to know what you already have in place.



## 1. Perform a communications audit

What's working, and what isn't? Narrowing the focus to your specific needs is an important first step, because it'll inform the investments you make further down the line. Take stock of your current technology, policies and past performance to identify areas for improvement.



## 2. Talk to your staff

Surveying employees is a must. They've got the most direct experience with high-pressure communication, and they're the people that will feel the direct effects of any process changes. Find out what your staff thinks of your comms, and what they'd like to change.



## 3. Look for opportunities to integrate

Does your current electronic health record (EHR) platform integrate smoothly and securely with your IM platform? Can you access and share protected health information (PHI) on your email client without jumping through hoops? Find out whether or not your communication platforms 'talk' to one another and ditch any antisocial software. If you're responding to emergencies, integrations need to be seamless and information readily available.



## 4. Decide on devices

Studies have estimated that over 80 percent of healthcare professionals bring their own devices to work and use them to communicate. Either allow staff to bring their own phones and laptops and write a BYOD policy, or provide them. Smartphones in particular are an urgent communication must.



# Data security

HIPAA-compliance applies no matter the level of urgency. There are a few things to consider so you don't have to worry about regulations in a crisis situation.



## 5. Use compliant software

Look for communication tech that is explicitly HIPAA-compliant. Covering your bases and doing this research ahead of time means that PHI can be shared on the software without hesitation.



## 6. Consider hosting your own comms

Some IM or email providers will allow you to host their software on your own server. If you've got the capability, it's a useful way to keep everything in-house and retain complete control over privacy settings and regulatory compliance.

# Prioritizing clarity

Clear communication – both internal and external – has a [direct and proven impact](#) on mortality rates. It should be at the front of your mind at all times, but especially when communicating urgent, important information.



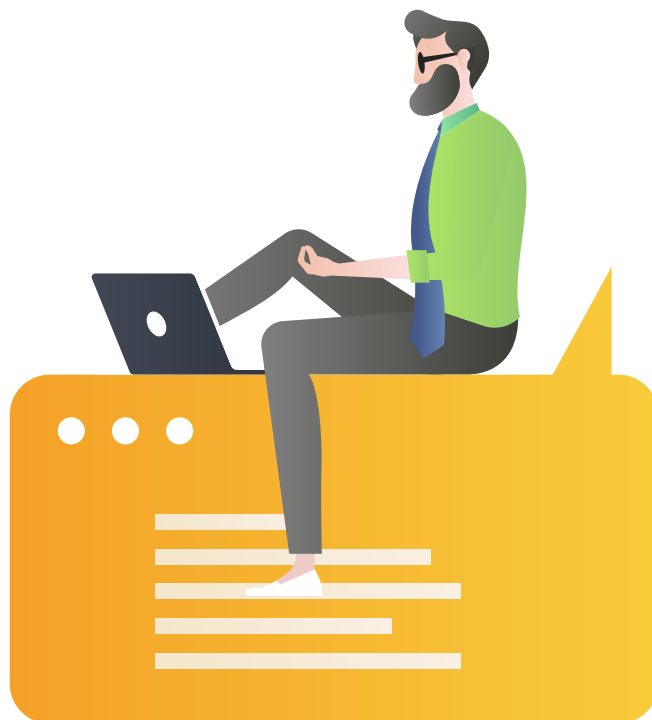
## 7. Enable notifications

Any software you adopt should allow you to [flag certain messages as 'urgent'](#), and to customize the notifications associated with them. Work a 'notifications' section into your [communication policy](#), and ensure that all staff have enabled them for flagged messages on their devices.



## 8. Use plain language

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services draws [a direct link](#) between patient health literacy and medical outcomes. Whether you're communicating with patients or colleagues, language should be kept as clear and jargon-free as possible, unless it aids understanding. Consult the plain language guidelines provided by the [CDC](#) and the [NIH](#), and share them with your staff. There should be no grey areas or opportunities for confusion in crisis situations.



# Patient-provider communication

As mentioned in the previous section, urgent healthcare communication doesn't just take place internally. Optimizing your patient-provider comms channels is an essential step in the direction of good quality care.



## 9. Target patient communications

Certain patients should be made more readily aware of developments than others – those with pre-existing conditions that may be more vulnerable to a viral outbreak, for example. It's worth organizing them into communication groups on your patient outreach channel ahead of time. Categorize these lists by vulnerability or urgency, and patients will know that they're getting tailored information that applies to them, fast. Whether that's automated email or text, those most likely to be affected should be communicated with first.





## 10. Maintain an 'always-on' comms channel

If you're operating a small clinic or rural medical service and don't operate around the clock, it can be a good idea to have a 'hotline' that patients can use if they're in need of emergency medical advice. Boundaries should be clearly set for its use, but with [telemedicine becoming more and more popular](#), it's not a bad idea to dip your toes in the water. Maintain an active social media presence and establish a customer mailing list to provide instant updates regarding changes to your services or public health advice.



## 11. Foster trust

The recent pandemic has boosted digital health practice, but [70 percent](#) of consumers still don't believe that their data is safe when it comes to telemedicine. Publicize the data security measures that you've taken to ensure that none of your customers hesitate before sharing valuable or timely information.





# Communicating with the industry

Whether you agree with it or not, insurance and the medical supply industry play a major role in the healthcare provision timeline. A lack of planning can result in delays and denials that lead to exacerbated health problems and, in some cases, death.



## 12. Collaborate with insurance providers

Though your business may be at cross-purposes with insurance providers, it has become essential to establish strong lines of communication with those you work with. Initial payment denials have risen in recent years. It's important to understand why, and to work collaboratively to address roadblocks so that care can resume.



## 13. Ensure patients are well-informed

45 percent of patients do a 'poor to fair' job of communicating insurance information. Confusion surrounding payment should present as small a hurdle as possible to patients seeking urgent care. It's a good idea to plan ahead and communicate average costs and co-payments *before* an emergency arises. Communication doesn't always need to be active: create an FAQ page on your website or provide information during online appointment booking if it applies to your business.





## 14. Talking to suppliers

Larry Glasscock, a standing committee member of the CDC's 'Strategic National Stockpile', [said](#) that there was 'a greater likelihood of [medical supply] shortages than most people realize.' That was in 2016, and four years later his caution has been justified. As with insurance providers, it's incredibly valuable to establish strong, collaborative lines of communication with your suppliers. Create an action plan in the event of shortages, and a communication process should last-minute supplies be required. You may not get to 'skip the line', but you *will* know exactly what to do, and who to talk to.



# The art of comms

If you've made it this far, you've earned another planning-themed aphorism. This one's from [Sun Tzu](#):

*'Plan for what is difficult while it is easy, do what is great while it is small.'*

He may have been referencing 'The Art of War', but there are definite parallels between battle strategy and urgent healthcare communication. Sharing and understanding information in the midst of a life-or-death situation is an incredibly difficult, stressful thing to have to do. It should never be a 'make it up as you go along' process, but should be backed by meaningful preparation.

Your weapons (communication tools) should be fit-for-purpose, and your troops (staff) should be fully briefed on the battle-plan (urgent communication policy). Ensure that you're going into the fray with these things taken care of, and you'll be able to face the enemy (confusion, miscommunication and delays) with confidence.

Or, as Sun Tzu [might have said](#), you'll be confronting chaos with discipline.

