



Electronic Communication Policy

Current as of: **November 2023**

Introduction

General practices are increasingly using electronic communication to correspond with patients and other health professionals.

Our practice's electronic communication policy for use with email, SMS, internet and social media will help protect the security of patient information and the reputation of Toowoomba Medical Centre.

The practice team are familiar with the following policy, comply with the policy, and understand the risks associated with using electronic forms of communication, both internally and external.

Scope

This policy applies to all employees, contractors, and third-party service providers who have access to the medical practice's information systems, as well as to service users.

Purpose and objectives

This policy outlines the guidelines and expectations for the electronic communication used within Toowoomba Medical Centre. The objective is to ensure the secure and effective exchange of information while maintaining patient confidentiality and complying with relevant laws and regulations. The practice has appointed Welma Joubert and Donna Hansen to act as Electronic Communications Officers.

The Electronic Communications Officer is responsible for:

- Maintaining this policy.
- Providing an information session on this policy as part of a new employee's induction.
- Informing staff of updates and refresher training through staff meetings and notices.
- Responding to any concerns that staff or patients have with the policy.
- Implementing and recording quality improvements to the system as a quality improvement activity in the Practice Improvement Log.

Policy content

Email and SMS – For staff

The use of email and short message services (SMS) are recognised as a useful tool for communication purposes. Practice staff are permitted to use the practice email accounts to send and receive business related material such as education updates, stakeholder communication, submitting Medicare provider number applications and communicating with locums or other staff where appropriate.

Practice staff will have access to a practice email account in the following levels:

Generic: This is the address that patients can utilise to contact the practice, reception@toowoombamedicalcentre.com.au

Practice manager: Personalised use of a practice email account, practicemanager@toowoombamedicalcentre.com.au

Receptionists: Group access to a practice email account, reception@toowoombamedicalcentre.com.au

Nurses: Group access to a practice email account, nurses@toowoombamedicalcentre.com.au this mailbox is routinely monitored, and not suitable for patients to contact us.



Faxes and Emails are sent form sendonly@toowoombamedicalcentre.com.au and this email does not receive emails

The use of the practice email account is for business communications only.

Patient information will only be sent via e-mail if it is securely encrypted according to industry standards, practice policy and where the patient has consented to this mode of direct communication.

Employees are reminded that the practice may become liable for the contents of any email message under certain circumstances. As such, a template email disclaimer will be inserted into the signature of all practice emails.

The use of personal email accounts using practice internet **may be used in personal/lunch/break times where this does not interfere with day to day operations.**

The use of personal email accounts using computers is **not permitted.**

Large files such as video files and photographs should not be transmitted over the practice internet computer systems for personal communication.

Protection against spam and theft of information

The practice utilises a spam filtering program

Staff will need to exercise caution in email communication and are advised to:

- Not open any email attachments or click on a link where the sender is not known.
- Not reply to spam mail.
- Not to share email passwords.
- Never try to unsubscribe from spam sites.
- Remain vigilant: do not provide confidential information to an email (especially by return email) no matter how credible the sender's email seems (for example, apparent emails from your bank).
- Be aware of phishing scams requesting logon or personal information (these may be via email or telephone).

Encrypted files are not automatically checked for viruses. All team members are to save, decrypt and then scan before opening the document.

Password maintenance

Each of our team members will have unique identification for all protected systems.

Staff will not share passwords. Access will be by individual password only and passwords will be changed immediately if compromised.

- Passwords will not be generic.
- Passwords will be private and not shared.
- Passwords cannot be re-used.
- Passwords will be made up of 6 – 8 characters with alpha, numeric and special characters. The preference is use of a unique phrase.



Password management

Only the Electronic Communications Officer or practice manager can reset passwords.

User identifications are archived or removed upon leaving the employment of the practice.

Lock-out will occur after three unsuccessful login attempts to an account.

Email and SMS – For patients

Our patients are given the option of being contacted by electronic means such as SMS.

All new and existing patients in the practice are able to ask for a copy of our electronic communication policy and are asked to provide signed consent to agree or disagree to be communicated with in this manner.

It is acknowledged by the practice that consent is implied if the patient initiates electronic communication with the practice.

Reception staff are to check each patient has this information on their record on arrival to the practice, along with the verification of their name, date of birth and address.

The signed consent will be scanned and recorded in the patient electronic record and their response recorded on the practice software.

The new patient consent form states that the practice may use this mode of communication: to send reminders for a scheduled appointments or clinical recalls.

The Patient Information sheet states that the practice:

- cannot guarantee confidentiality of information transferred via email will comply with the Australian Privacy Principles and the Privacy Act 1988.
- communications will not contain sensitive information, due to the risk of confidential information being accessed inadvertently or intentionally by a third party.
- communications will not contain results that only the general practitioner should be divulging in a follow-up appointment, ie abnormal results, education concerning a new diagnosis, etc
- communication will not entail promotion of any product and/or preventative health care (as some patients can interpret this as an advertisement)

Patients are advised that:

emails will be answered within 48 hours. (also included in the automatic email response).

patients should not use email to contact the practice in an emergency (also included in the automatic email response).

Automatic email response.

*This email is monitored at least once every 24 hours during the working week. If you wish to contact the practice urgently, please call the Practice phone number on **07 46 356 111**. As it is well known that communicating via email is not secure, any confidential information sent via email is strongly discouraged. The preferred method is in person, telephone, via Fax (07 4635 6144) or by mail.*

Our practice email account for patients and stakeholders for non-urgent communication with our practice is **reception@toowoombamedicalcentre.com.au**



This email account will be routinely checked throughout the business day by the delegated authority, **Welma Joubert and /or Dale Mailman**, at the start of business, midday and one hour before end of business.

The email message will then be forwarded to the appropriate team member for response. Communication conducted with a patient via electronic means will be added to the patient's medical record by the team member resolving the enquiry.

When recalling a patient for a test result, the extent to which patients are followed up will depend on the level of urgency and this is normally done by text message or phone call.

Email and SMS between the practice and the patient will form part of the medical record and need to be included, as must any actions taken in response to the message.

Internet

The use of the internet as a legitimate business and research tool is both recognised and approved by Toowoomba Medical Centre. However, staff and management have a responsibility to ensure that there is no abuse of the resources for private purposes, that staff productivity is not compromised, that offensive material is not spread throughout the organisation and that the practice computer system is protected from the introduction of computer viruses.

All downloads from the internet must be scanned for viruses.

All sites accessed must comply with legal and ethical standards and the practice policies. The internet must never be used to download or access any illegal software or pornographic, defamatory, offensive, share-trading or gambling-related material.

Downloading of material via the internet slows access for other staff. The internet should not be used for downloading music, videos or radio programs, for making personal purchases or accessing interactive social websites, including Facebook, Youtube, Skype and Twitter, except in a professional capacity and approved by the Electronic Communications Officer.

Web browser security settings are not to be changed without authorisation of the practice manager.

The practice will have in place firewalls and intrusion detection systems as advised by our IT company **Pivotal Data Solutions**.

Social media

Social media is defined as websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. These include Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Social media is not permitted to be used from practice devices in a private capacity by any staff member.

The practice utilises the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) social media policy which can be found on page 13 in the *RACGP's Guide for the use of social media in general practice* and can be accessed by clicking the following link:

<https://www.racgp.org.au/download/Documents/e-health/Social-media-guide-v5.pdf>



Further information

The RACGP has additional information on using electronic forms of communication in general practice.

Visit:

- Standards for general practices (5th edition) - <https://www.racgp.org.au/running-a-practice/practice-standards/standards-5th-edition>

Other relevant policies

- Privacy policy
- Policy and procedure manual
- Data breach response plan
- Training register

Policy Review statement

This policy will be reviewed regularly to ensure it reflects the current processes and procedures of Toowoomba Medical Centre and current legislation requirements.

Document Title	Electronic Communication Policy	Version #	1
Effective Date			
Version #	Change Description	Introduced	
1	Original document	2020	
2	Review	2023	