

5 SYSTEMS FOR FOLLOW-UP TRACKING

COPIC encourages practices to implement systems for tracking and managing patients and events requiring follow up. Failure to follow up by one or more parties is a recurrent cause of preventable errors. Because of the importance of these systems to patient safety, the following are five areas of high concern:

1. Patient follow up

This involves “closing the loop” by notifying patients when they need a subsequent visit, or by contacting and notifying providers if a patient fails to follow up when needed. Non-adherence with recommendations may have risks serious enough to require a distinct “informed refusal” process. More often it is sufficient to document instances such as missed appointments, failure to take medications as recommended, failure to follow medical advice, failure to schedule a recommended test or procedure, or failure to see a consultant when advised.

2. Consultations and referrals

This focuses on a system to alert the referring provider that a previously arranged consultation did not occur, for example with another provider or facility. It includes systems for communicating in both directions between primary care and specialty consultants—and between specialists—when the patient’s non-compliance may have significant clinical consequences.

3. Test results

This involves a system to review and act on on-site and off-site laboratory tests, imaging, pathology, and other diagnostic procedures that generate results needing review and potentially further action.

4. Received reports and correspondence that require review

This involves a system to process and act on information received from external sources. This information may not necessarily have been initiated by the treating provider.

5. Patient notification of test results and recommendations

This involves a system to communicate results, information and recommendations to patients who are not physically present.

Whether done manually (e.g., a card file) or with computer-assistance, systematically managing these five areas can be accomplished with a dedicated workflow for each, or through one comprehensive, follow-up and tracking system.

In its most basic form, a follow-up system is a “tickler file.” Electronic applications for this purpose can offer significant advantages. However, they need careful configuration and testing. Although most EHRs offer reminder and alert functions in various forms, COPIC’s experience is that many of these may have serious flaws and gaps that inevitably require human intervention. This implies that both providers and support staff have important roles in the system. Furthermore, involving patients in the workflow for monitoring future agenda items (especially if these become overdue) adds a valuable layer of safety.