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Email & Electronic Messaging Policy

1. Purpose

This policy outlines the safe, secure and appropriate management of email and electronic messaging at Gap Road Medical Centre to ensure:

- Patient safety
- Timely and appropriate responses
- Protection of privacy and confidentiality
- Compliance with:
  - RACGP Standards for General Practices (5th edition)
  - Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) and Australian Privacy Principles
  - Health Records Act 2001 (Victoria)
  - Clinical governance and medico-legal obligations

2. Scope

This policy applies to:

- All GPs, nurses, allied health professionals
- Administrative staff
- Practice Manager
- Contractors, registrars, students and locums

It applies to:

- Incoming and outgoing emails
- Website contact forms
- Electronic patient enquiries
- Internal email communication
- Communication with other health providers

It does not apply to personal email accounts or social media messaging.

3. Principles of Email Use

- Email is not a secure communication method unless encrypted.
- Email must not be used for urgent or emergency clinical matters.
- Staff must not provide clinical advice unless authorised.
- All communications must be professional, accurate and respectful.
- Relevant clinical communication must be documented in the patient's medical record.
- Privacy and confidentiality obligations apply at all times.

4. Managing Incoming Emails & Patient Messages

4.1 Monitoring

- The practice email inbox is checked **at least twice daily on business days**.
- Emails are not monitored outside business hours, weekends or public holidays.
- An automated reply advises patients that email is not suitable for urgent matters.

Responsibility: Practice Manager or delegated administrative staff.

4.2 Triage Procedure

Upon receipt, emails are categorised as follows:

A. Administrative Enquiry

Examples:

- Appointment requests
- Billing queries
- Forms
- General information

Action:

- Respond within 2 business days or action appropriately.
- No clinical advice provided.
- Document only if relevant to patient care.

B. Non-Urgent Clinical Enquiry

Examples:

- Prescription requests
- Results enquiries
- Follow-up questions

Action:

- Forward to treating GP or duty GP the same business day.
- GP determines:
    - Phone call required
    - Appointment required
    - Secure message appropriate
- All advice must be documented in the clinical record.

C. Urgent Clinical Concern Identified

Examples:

- Chest pain
- Severe symptoms
- Mental health crisis indicators

Action:

- Contact patient immediately by phone.
- Advise to seek urgent care or call 000.
- Notify GP immediately.
- Document all actions in the patient record.

Administrative staff must not provide medical advice.

5. Sending Emails to Patients

Emails may be sent:

- For administrative purposes
- For non-sensitive communication
- When patient consent has been obtained
- When secure systems are used for sensitive information

Before sending:

- Confirm recipient email address carefully
- Limit sensitive clinical detail unless secure encryption is used
- Double-check attachments
- Include confidentiality disclaimer

6. Clinical Use of Email

- Email must not replace urgent communication.
- Patients must be instructed to phone the practice for urgent concerns.

- Clinical advice via email must:
  - Be appropriate
  - Be documented in the patient's medical record
- Complex matters require an appointment.

7. Patient Consent

- Patients must provide consent to communicate via email.
- Consent must be recorded in the patient file.
- Patients are informed of:
  - Risks of email communication
  - Expected response times
  - Not to use email for emergencies

8. Privacy & Confidentiality

Gap Road Medical Centre:

- Complies with the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth)
- Complies with the Health Records Act 2001 (Vic)
- Treats patient email addresses as confidential information
- Prohibits forwarding patient information to unauthorised recipients
- Uses secure messaging systems where available
- Includes confidentiality disclaimers on outgoing emails

9. Data Security

- Practice email accounts are password protected.
- Multi-factor authentication used where available.
- Staff must log out on shared devices.
- Emails must not be stored on personal devices unless encrypted and authorised.
- Suspicious or phishing emails must be reported immediately to the Practice Manager or IT provider.
- Email systems are backed up in accordance with IT and data security policies.

10. Email Record Keeping

- Clinical emails must be saved or copied into the patient's medical record.
- Documentation must include:
  - Advice provided
  - Attempts to contact patient
  - Instructions given
- Administrative emails are retained in accordance with the Records Retention and Destruction Policy.

11. Prohibited Use

Staff must not use practice email to:

- Send offensive, discriminatory or inappropriate content
- Conduct personal business
- Circumvent privacy or security controls
- Share passwords or login credentials

Breaches may result in disciplinary action.

12. Staff Responsibilities

All staff must:

- Read this policy at induction
- Participate in ongoing training
- Escalate concerns to the Practice Manager
- Comply with medico-legal and privacy obligations

Practice Owners and Management are responsible for oversight and regular review.

13. Flow Chart – Managing Patient Email Messages

Email Received

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Checked twice daily (Business hours only)

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Categorise:

Administrative?

→ Respond/action → Close

Non-Urgent Clinical?

→ Forward to GP same day
→ GP determines action
→ Document in clinical record

Urgent Clinical Concern?

→ Call patient immediately
→ Advise appropriate action / 000
→ Notify GP
→ Document

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Archive securely

14. Policy Review

This policy is reviewed:

- Annually
- When legislation changes
- When RACGP Standards are updated
- When practice systems change
- Following any significant incident