

Digital Dictation and Transcription: An Efficient Money and Time Saver

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Here is an area of office procedure that can immediately help to increase efficiency and save money and time. Even better, there is little upfront cost and implementation is relatively painless. Here are the players; your computer, a handheld digital recorder, and a transcription service or digital transcription equipment if you choose in-house transcription.

How it works

Dictate the patient encounter into a digital recorder anytime and anywhere you like. The dictations are then downloaded to your computer and transcribed either in-house or sent via the internet to an outsourcing company. The transcriptions are then downloaded to your computer and manipulated in the manner that best fits your office environment.

The Players

Digital recorders are light, easy to use, and inexpensive. A functional recorder can run anywhere from \$50 upward, depending upon the features you like. One feature that is a must is automatic voice file compression. We prefer the Olympus brand recorders. They use a DSS format which gives a 15:1 compression. My recorder comes with over 11 hours of recording time and I use rechargeable batteries that are always at the ready.

Tip - One very neat option is a voice recorder that comes with a digital camera. If you routinely take pictures in your office you may want to look at the Sony or Olympus brands.

The Computer that is used for transfer of files does not have to be "beefed up" in any way. Although high speed internet is not a requirement, it is a big help in reducing the time needed to transfer files. HIPAA regulations currently dictate that a minimum 128 bit encryption be used in transfer of patient records. Have your IT person or transcription company ensure that you are encrypting at this level. Sending compressed files takes only seconds to a couple of minutes, depending upon the amount of voice files being transferred. Dial up will take approximately 10 times as long, which may not be a problem in some offices. Transcribed word files are very small and not a time concern.

File Transfer can be done in many ways and may be dictated by the company, but most will leave the option up to you, including how you want your word file to be labeled and saved. We have found that uploading voice files directly on the company web site is quick and easy. We have the option to download in the same manner but choose to receive our word files via an e-mail attachment. One of the benefits of this type of dictation or transcription is the archiving of both voice and word files. Any errors are easily checked and corrected through cross comparison. Almost all companies will archive on their end for a period of time.

Transcriptions Companies range from small start up companies to large domestic or foreign companies. Larger companies have the advantage of a work force that will allow uninterrupted service. With a good company, their proprietary software will be user-friendly and have a turnaround time within 24 hours.

Here are some things to consider and watch out for when researching companies. Make sure they adhere to the standards set by the American Association for Medical Transcription (AAMT found at www.aamt.org). Always ask how you will be charged and insist on a detailed explanation. Rates "per line" are the most common, and range from six to 24 cents. Some will charge per actual lines seen on the page whether the line contains one or many words. This is

almost always more costly and subject to variability based upon margins, font type, and size. AAMT standards define a "line" as 65 characters, including spaces.

Many companies give discounted rates when using your personal templates and macros. To speed up the dictation / transcription process, use templates (also known as boiler plates) and macros. Send the transcription company your outline for new patient and established patient dictations. Label and send your common phrases, normal exams, operative procedures, and patient instructions as a "macro" for the company to keep on file. Use the named macro when dictating to keep from repeating yourself.

It is very possible to get a company that delivers a quality product and service for eight cents per line. Make sure you check for quality before deciding on a company. Many will offer free trial periods and do not require a contract. If a contract is issued, it is not in your best interest to sign on for a period of time. The contract should only contain language used to protect the company's proprietary interests, allowing you to be able to terminate the service at any time.

Tip - Make sure to have them sign-on to your business' associate agreement. Do not forget to ask basic research questions, such as how long the company has been in business, how many employees they have, and ALWAYS check references.

To estimate your potential costs, use the word count feature of your word processing program to find how many characters are in your average new and established patient note. Divide this number by 65 and then add the average number of new and established patients your practice sees per month. As an example, a practice seeing 150 patients per week should anticipate a cost of \$750 - \$1,000 per month at eight cents per line.

Hal Ornstein, DPM, FACFAS, and Chairman of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management states, "I have used digital dictation for over three years and love it. It has increased efficiency significantly at many levels and saved me approximately 20 % on dictation costs. We love that we have our transcribed dictation back to us when returning to the office from the day before and charts finished and put away by the afternoon." His current transcription company can be located at www.perfectdigitalrecords.com.

Our service has been doing an outstanding job for us, and can be researched at (www.vinfonet.com). We estimate a savings of 40% over performing the transcription in-house. Our cost is less than an hourly wage paid to an office employee to perform this task. Further savings are realized by adding the cost of payroll fees, taxes, employee management and benefits. Also, there is no "down-time" due to absence.

Tip – We dictate office meetings and protocol into the recorder to be transcribed. We find it to be less expensive than having the office manager spend time performing this task.

In-house transcription is another option. If one should choose, you can anticipate spending around \$200-\$350 for the digital transcription equipment. We have used equipment purchased from www.startstop.com and found it to work very well. You may also want to look at the Olympus line (www.olympusamerica.com).

Tip - Here is a look at our dictation / transcription process. If possible, dictation is performed after every patient is seen. At the end of the day, it is downloaded to the computer. Each day's voice files are saved in corresponding folders labeled with the date and physician initials. The transcription website is then opened, the files are chosen, and with one click it is uploaded to the company. The following day, the word files are received via e-mail, printed, and the word files saved. As a tip, we do not file our dictation unless it is matched with that day's encounter form, which will also have notations indicating it has been billed. We have our word files labeled with the first letter of the patient's last name, followed by their patient number, and the date on which the patient was seen. These are then placed into alphabetically labeled folders and backed up each day on the server.

I hope this helps makes your practice more efficient and profitable. I can be reached at podiatrist@mindspring.com and will try to assist in any way I can.