

FOUNDATION MODULE: COMMUNICATION



Answering medicines information enquiries requires well developed communication skills. Skills that are particularly important in medicines information are active listening, an understanding of nonverbal communication and being clear and concise in your response. Enquiries can range from a simple question to a request to help solve a complex problem.

Regardless of the nature of the question, the same fundamental practices should be applied to all enquiries. This module will provide an overview of the steps involved in processing a medicines information enquiry and some practical tips to help you get started. A more in-depth explanation of enquiry processing and documentation can be found in Chapter 5 of the Medicines Information Procedure Manual.

Receiving enquiries

Most enquiries in MI are received by telephone, email or in person. It is usually necessary to ask further questions of the enquirer so that you can effectively answer the enquiry. You will need to ask:

- whether the enquiry is for a specific patient or for general information?
- the name of the enquirer and their job, role or interest in the enquiry
- the best way to contact the enquirer and the type of response the enquirer wants to receive e.g. phone call, email, letter
- the required time frame for an answer.

You will also usually need to consider what further specific information is required to answer the enquiry. Most enquirers do not specifically request the information that they need to answer the question or solve the problem at hand so one of the important skills to learn in MI is asking the right questions. This will help you understand the context of the question and allow you to answer the enquiry appropriately and efficiently. For enquiries about a specific patient, a unit record number (UR) or medical record number (MRN) will help you obtain further useful information from their medical history.

As you work your way through the subjects you will gain an understanding of the right questions to ask. Each subject includes a list of questions to ask an enquirer and examples of real enquiries.

Tips for receiving an enquiry over the phone:

- Always identify yourself when you answer the phone.
- Actively listen and take notes.
- Summarise what you understand the enquiry to be and confirm this with the enquirer.
- Consider giving the enquirer the option of a written response. This provides an opportunity to collate your ideas in written form and provide references and it may save time for both parties.
- Be familiar with the telephone answering procedures and expectations of your workplace.

Documentation

MI services will have a procedure for documenting enquiries, make sure you are familiar with the system in place. Regardless of the work setting, all medicines information enquiries should be documented. If standard procedures are not in place it is recommended that they be established.

All MI enquiries should be documented because:

- The enquirer may return and need the information again or may have further information to add to the enquiry.
- It can save time if a similar enquiry is received in the future. It may not answer the enquiry but can be a good point to start from.
- If you receive a complaint you have the documentation to support your answer.
- Past enquiries can be used for training new MI pharmacists and as case studies when preparing training material.
- It can help ensure quality of practice and outcomes.
- Documentation can provide workload statistics that may be used to support funding and demonstrate the value of the service to the healthcare community.

Answering enquiries

Responses to medicines information enquiries are most commonly delivered by phone or email. Regardless of the method of delivery it is important to ensure that the response:

- is given in clear and concise language.
- is delivered within the required timeframe. An urgent enquiry may require an initial response based on readily available information with further detail provided later if required.
- answers the question that was asked. This involves evaluating the available information and applying it to the clinical situation so that your answer is helpful to the enquirer.
- is tailored to the need of the enquirer. The level of detail and the formality of the response will depend on the nature of the enquiry as well as the position of the enquirer and possibly your working relationship with them. For example, an enquiry from a head of department about a potential change to a procedure may require a formal meeting with a detailed written response and references, whereas a verbal response may be sufficient for an enquiry from a nurse about IV compatibility.
- includes an explanation of any limits on your answer (e.g. when no information is available or it is outside your area of expertise).

Also consider what further questions your response may invite and be prepared to answer those (e.g. an enquiry about the adverse effects of a medicine may also require information about alternative treatment options).

It may be necessary to check your response with another pharmacist before responding to the enquirer. Make sure you are familiar with the policies and procedures of your workplace.

Written responses

A written response can be a letter or the body of an email. The nature of the enquiry may dictate how the response is delivered. A letter is more formal and usually more suitable for patient-specific enquiries or a response to a department or committee. An email may be more convenient and preferred by the enquirer, however it can be more easily forwarded on to third parties without your knowledge and potentially used out of context. Be careful not to use sensitive information such as patient identifiers in the subject line or body of an email. Attaching a secured PDF of your letter to an email is a good way of ensuring the information will not be changed and makes it less likely that the information is used outside of the context it was provided in. Check what procedures are in your workplace before deciding how to respond.

A comprehensive written response should include:

- a summary of the enquiry
- the response, including an introduction
- sources searched
- summary of findings, with comments on the quality of the information
- a conclusion that addresses the question and is supported by the findings
- references in standard format
- your name, job title and contact details.

Plain language

Whether you use email or letter, writing your response in plain language will ensure that your reader can understand what you have written the first time they read it. Plain language is clear and concise, avoids the use of jargon or abbreviations and is unambiguous. Favour the active voice over the passive voice, use the first or second person (I, you, we), shorter sentences and precise words.

- The active voice gets straight to the point. In the past the passive voice was used in scientific writing in an effort to appear objective, however it is now recognised that overuse of the passive voice makes it harder for readers to understand scientific information. Passive sentences are usually longer than active sentences and may not indicate who is responsible for an action. Tailor your use of active or passive to the enquirer accordingly. For example: *reduce the dose in renal impairment* (active) and *the dose is recommended to be reduced in renal impairment* (passive).
- Avoid overly long sentences and try to keep to one idea per sentence. For example: *Digoxin is a positive inotropic drug that can be given intravenously to increase the force of cardiac contractions and lower heart rate, but in cases of renal failure the dosages may be required to be lowered.* When rewritten in shorter sentences it is easier to read: *Digoxin is a positive inotropic drug that that can be given intravenously. It increases the force of cardiac contractions and lowers heart rate. Use lower doses in patients with renal failure.*
- Eliminate unnecessary words but be sure not to leave out important information, Unnecessary words do not provide useful content. For example; *Generally speaking,* writers can *basically* rely *in the main* on *certain* fundamental techniques to structure their text. The *end* result was shorter *in length* than we had anticipated.

- Some examples of short and precise words:
some, few, many instead of 'a number of'
enough instead of 'adequate number or amount'
because, since instead of 'due to the fact that',
more than instead of "in excess of "

For more information on grammar and language conventions refer to the Australian Style Manual or the Macquarie Dictionary. For more information about writing in plain language refer to the Australian Manual of Scientific Style (subscription required).

Telephone responses

Some enquirers prefer to receive an answer to their enquiry over the phone. You will need to prepare your response as thoroughly as if it were a written response.

Before calling the enquirer, have your response and any relevant resources ready so that you are prepared for any further questions. If the enquiry is about a specific patient, be sure to confirm the patient details before providing the response.

Be clear and concise and offer to follow up with written information as well. Follow a logical structure and be prepared to repeat key points.

There is no body language to guide how your message is being received so you will need to take a moment to pause and check that the enquirer understands your response. Slow down if necessary, so that information is not being delivered faster than it can be understood.

Ask the enquirer whether the information has been helpful; this helps you to gather feedback and may lead to further questions being asked.

Face-to-face responses

Some people prefer face-to-face communication. It is usually more personal and less formal and is less likely to be misinterpreted. Like telephone responses, face-to-face responses should be prepared as thoroughly as a written response. Face-to-face communication can be useful when you need to explain or show someone a resource, as opposed to simply sending them a copy. In some instances it may be appropriate to offer to follow up your conversation with written information.