

# 'Spotlight on' series

## Writing an outpatient letter

Good written communication is essential to clinical care. Follow these tips to write effective, patient-centred letters following outpatient consultations.

### 1 Write letters directly to the patient wherever possible



This has been linked to **more patient-centred consultations** and stronger multidisciplinary working and is preferred by most patients.

**Minimise the use of specialist jargon and abbreviations.**

This approach is recommended by the **Academy of Medical Royal Colleges<sup>1</sup>**, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence<sup>2</sup>, and the Government response to the Paterson Enquiry<sup>3</sup>.

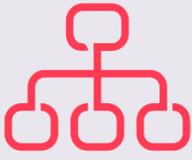
### 2 Be clear on purpose of the letter



State the reason for the letter upfront.

Ensure any question asked by the patient or referrer is clearly answered.

### 3 Structure for readability



Keep sentences and paragraphs short to break up text, making it easy to scan and digest.

Keep the content succinct, clear and relevant.

Consider using headings, such as those suggested in the Professional Records and Standards Body guidance<sup>3</sup>.

### 4 Ensure information is up-to-date, accurate and unambiguous



Diagnosis summaries and current situation headings are helpful but must be updated following each consultation to ensure accuracy.

Outpatient letters can be complemented by end of treatment summaries, recording detailed information about each patient's individual treatment<sup>5</sup>.

### 5 Detail next steps



Set out a clear management plan.

Be clear on the intention of any treatment.

Detail the process for obtaining written consent for any new treatment or procedure and summarise the consent discussion.

Where actions are required, list these clearly with time frames and who is responsible for each one.

### 6 Provide relevant information to other healthcare professionals



Include a short section directly addressed to GPs and other professionals if you require any direct action from them.

Clarify follow-up arrangements both with the patient and referring team.

### 7 Give details of how to obtain further information



Provide contact details for the patient to be able to directly contact the clinical team if they have any questions.

Include links to reputable online sources of information.

### 8 Carefully consider the use of ambient voice recognition technology



Only use tools that have been specifically approved by the healthcare organisation in which you are working.

Consent should be obtained from patients before ambient voice recognition tools are used, and data storage, access and governance must be robust.

Review summaries for accuracy and understanding, ensuring letters are not overly long, and that key clinical decisions are clear.

Where errors are identified, consider the level of severity and whether there is a need to report it to local or national error monitoring systems.

### 9 Review your practice



Use feedback from patients and colleagues to improve your letters and include this in your professional development.

#### References and further reading

1. Please\_write\_to\_me\_Guidance\_010918.pdf
2. Shared decision making: the importance of writing clinical letters directly to the patient
3. Government response to the independent inquiry report into the issues raised by former surgeon Ian Paterson - GOV.UK
4. prsb-structure-and-content-of-health-care-records.pdf
5. Creating bespoke end-of-treatment summaries | The Bulletin of the Royal College of Surgeons of England
6. Guidance on the use of AI-enabled ambient scribing products in health and care settings

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#### Acknowledgements

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