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Dictation: a guide for the foundation year doctor

Introduction

As a doctor, at some point you will have to dictate letters or other documents to be typed up. Dictation is an essential skill that is not automatically taught. It is advisable to get into good habits, to make it easier for the staff typing your correspondence as well as yourself and your team.

Machinery

Get to know how to work a dictaphone – a doctor or secretary will show you if you are unsure. It may sound obvious, but always rewind to the beginning of the tape. Do not compulsively click on and off when you are recording, but try to dictate in reasonable bursts. Make sure you do not accidentally cut off the last thing you have just said.

Some units have introduced digital dictation via a software package. You speak into a computer, using a microphone, and then the secretary will type this up. Again, familiarize yourself with the technology involved.

Voice-activated systems are in their infancy and not widely used.

Clarity

At the beginning of the tape, say who you are and the date. It is also helpful to say which consultant and/or clinic this relates to, in case the tape gets separated from the notes. State the patient's name and hospital number first, so that the secretary knows straightaway which file to look for. Do not give the GP's details first, as this can be misleading for all involved. There is no need to give full details of the patient and GP unless the notes are going to be unavailable to the typist. Even then, he/she can find the computer administration record, so long as the patient's name and unit number are clear. It is helpful to say, 'that's the end of the tape/clinic, thank

you' at the appropriate point, so that the secretary does not have to listen to the tape running on to check if there is anything else on there. Just because there are no paper notes or tracer proformas left does not mean there are no more letters on the tape.

For digital dictation, it is unnecessary to say that this is the first or last patient, as you might on a tape. The secretary can listen to the electronic sound files in any order. Make sure you enter the right unit number for each patient.

Secretaries are smarter than you might give them credit for, but you should still dictate clearly. Talk slowly – there may be several different secretaries typing junior doctors' letters and not one particular one who will get used to your style. Use plain succinct language and do not waffle. Even if you are a clear 'dictator' and speak good English, there may be problems. A poor-quality cassette and dictaphone may muffle your voice and/or pick up extraneous noise. Digital dictation does not necessarily solve this. Also, the secretary may have set the tape speed, volume and tone on her/his audio machine in such a way that certain words are inadvertently not easily picked up. Try not to cough, sniff or drink while recording, as noises can be magnified and sound impolite.

Spell any words outside the specialty – they may be familiar to you, but not necessarily to secretaries, who are like specialists or even subspecialists in their own fields. The same applies for new drugs, even within the specialty. Secretaries may not have access to an up-to-date hard-copy of the *British National Formulary* and may not realize that they can look at this online. For figures, specify the individual digits as well as the full number – 13 can sound like 30. An experienced secretary will know if the number does not sound right and check the notes, but you cannot rely on that. Common sources of confusion, which should always be spelt out, are:

- Hyper- / hypo-
- Abd- / Add-
- Micro- / Macro-

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Use a letter template if there is one, or try to keep to a similar format for all your letters. There is no need to keep saying 'new paragraph' or 'new line' – competent secretaries can be trusted to work out appropriate structuring for themselves.

Never dictate anything that is not written in the notes, as secretaries refer to them when they cannot hear something properly. Also, from a governance point of view, if the tape is mislaid, then that part of the record is lost unless you can remember it afterwards when re-dictating.

Follow up

Find out the established system in the office for signing correspondence – where to pick it up and put it when you have finished. It may not be correct automatically to give the signed letters back to the person who typed them. You may have to place them in a basket or folder or hand them to someone else.

Sign promptly – there may be targets and time limits for sending letters to GPs. Remember, no matter what the secretaries do, it is your responsibility to check what you sign. If you need to make significant

changes, do not just write them in pen, but speak to the secretary. He/she will need to alter the file copy in the notes, which may already have gone back to the medical records department. Hence, it is best to dictate clearly in the first place. Do not worry if the secretary amends some of your prose, particularly if English is not your first language. Secretaries are generally very good at phraseology.

Respect

Treat your secretaries with courtesy, just as your consultants do. You may notice that consultants think very highly of their secretaries, with good reason. They work incredibly hard, care greatly about patients, carry much responsibility and suffer considerable stress. In many ways, they are an undervalued resource. If the secretaries

are unhappy with your behaviour, your consultant will soon be made aware of this. Do not be afraid to ask the secretaries for constructive feedback and coaching on your dictation.

Conclusions

There is an art to dictation, and secretaries will be pleased when you get it right for them. This makes working relationships easier for everyone. Know how to work the devices and make sure you dictate clearly. Never hesitate to ask for help or feedback – nobody will think badly of you. **BJHM**

Dr Hooke would like to thank the medical secretaries who have helped her with this article.

Conflict of interest: Dr Hooke has worked in both management and medicine. Her views are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of her employer or any other organization that she is associated with.

KEY POINTS

- Dictate clearly in concise, plain English.
- Respect secretaries as a valuable resource.
- Ask for help if you are unsure, whether with dictation itself or the hardware or software.
- Sign letters promptly and follow the system.