

Some Like a Bot

Self-service features keep patients happy; workflow changes cut administrative burden

■ **By Jose Rocha, MHL, CPPM, CPC, and Krishna Kurapati, MS**

While physicians regularly use cutting-edge tools to perform innovative procedures, their practices often appear stuck in decades-old workflows that stifle productivity and frustrate patients.

Changes to practice methodologies necessitated by the global pandemic heightened patient demands for timely and remote access to care. Practices had to develop new workflows to accommodate the evolving care

environment. Those demands have continued even after a semblance of normalcy has returned to practices.

Keeping patients happy and retaining them in the practice is more cost-effective than finding

and onboarding new patients. The link between effective communication and the care experience is critical, with 91% of patients who were unhappy with their care saying they would not return to the practice or recommend it to others.¹

Practices like First Choice Neurology (FCN) are embracing digital technologies such as secure texting, chatbots, and virtual visits to meet patients where they are and engage them using the methods they prefer. Based in Medley, FL, FCN is the largest neurology group in the United States, serving southern, eastern, and central Florida with 41 locations and nearly 300 staffmembers. In addition to office locations, FCN operates centers for MRIs, infusion, multiple sclerosis, sleep, pain, nutrition, occupational and physical therapy, and Parkinson's disease.

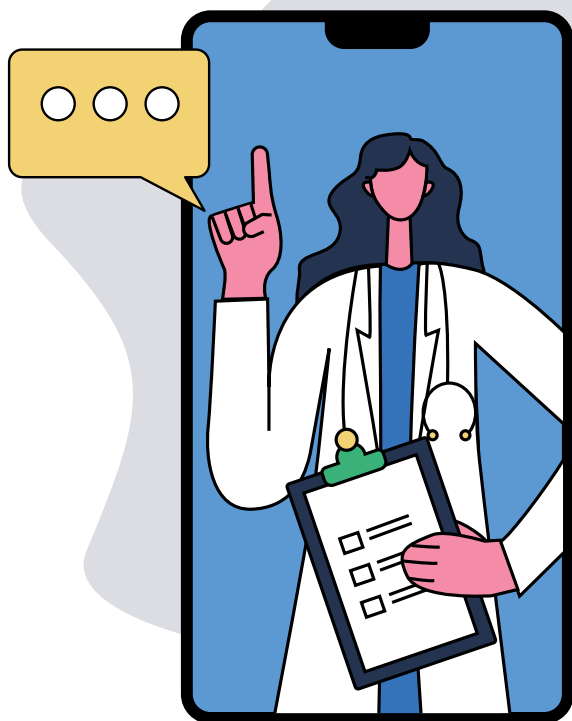
Practice leaders are also discovering that streamlined workflows enable physicians to increase patient visits or allow them to go home early—critical for maintaining work-life balance. At FCN, that means seeing two or three more patients per day than before at 36 clinics and improving clinic revenue by 24%, depending on location. What is more, the practice group now scores 4.8 out of 5 in terms of patient satisfaction.

FCN Saves 18 Minutes per Patient Visit

The practice of medicine had to change quickly in the wake of community shutdowns during the darkest days of the pandemic. Virtual care through telehealth and self-serve options became commonplace as physicians saw patients using whatever methods they could.

In a recent survey, 83% of patients indicated they wanted to retain digital care options that gained ground during the pandemic, including online check-in (49%), telehealth visits when possible (46%), digital and electronic payment options (44%), and electronic communications with providers (36%).² The same survey showed that 72% of providers are seeking digital enhancements for patient care and practice workflows.

A total of 44% of physicians say that burnout has a strong impact on their work-life balance, with an additional 22% reporting moderate impacts. Even before the pandemic, physician burnout statistics were double those of the general population, with the president of the National Academy of Medicine noting that up to 75% of clinicians reported symptoms of



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Patients Mistake Chatbots for Humans

In addition to improved patient flow, First Choice Neurology (FCN) physicians and staff communicate directly with patients in an expedient and private manner online instead of playing phone tag or swapping voice-mails or portal messages. Patients express satisfaction with the chatbot, often commenting they had no idea they were communicating with an automated chatbot and not a live agent.

Indeed, in December 2022, an FCN practice learned its chatbot's human-like interaction is earning patient trust, bringing new meaning to holiday cheer. That month, a patient brought in a box of homemade chocolate cookies for the presumably "helpful" office worker who assisted her with "messaging."

Staff members kindly informed the patient that the helper was actually a chatbot. At first the patient did not believe them, insisting, "No, no, no. It was a person!" The staff checked the chatbot logs and confirmed no human agent intervention had taken place during the patient's conversation with the AI bot. Practice personnel explained the definition of a chatbot to the patient, who burst out laughing along with the staff.

Moments later, a second patient walked in to drop off a Starbucks gift card for the same reason of thanking a helpful office worker—and was quickly enlightened on the merits of a conversational friendly chatbot.

This story was later shared at a FCN managers meeting, when practice leaders recalled similar incidents of patients bringing gifts to their practice to thank the presumed human agent (a.k.a. chatbot) who assisted their online self-registration.

Realizing some patients of older generations might feel uncomfortable or lack experience communicating with chatbots, FCN sought to make the chatbot less complicated to use. They attribute their positive feedback to the program's mental simplicity. The goal was to keep the intricate ways of using a chatbot simple to enhance the patient experience.

depression, exhaustion, PTSD, and sleep disorders.³

A recent study showed that even small changes to practice workflows can have an outsized effect on overall organizational efficiency.⁴ By reducing administrative burdens caused by inefficient manual patient intake, FCN removed 18 minutes per patient visit, improving patient satisfaction while reducing office staff overtime by 18%.

Auto Check-In Reduces Patient Wait Times

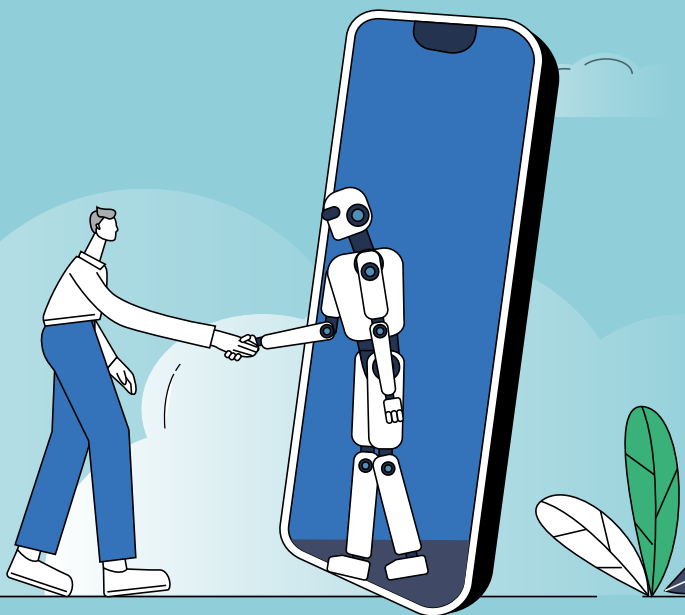
The pandemic spurred FCN, along with medical practices nationwide, to rethink patient safety strategies and workflows to manage a dramatic increase in patient volume following the spring 2020 shutdown.

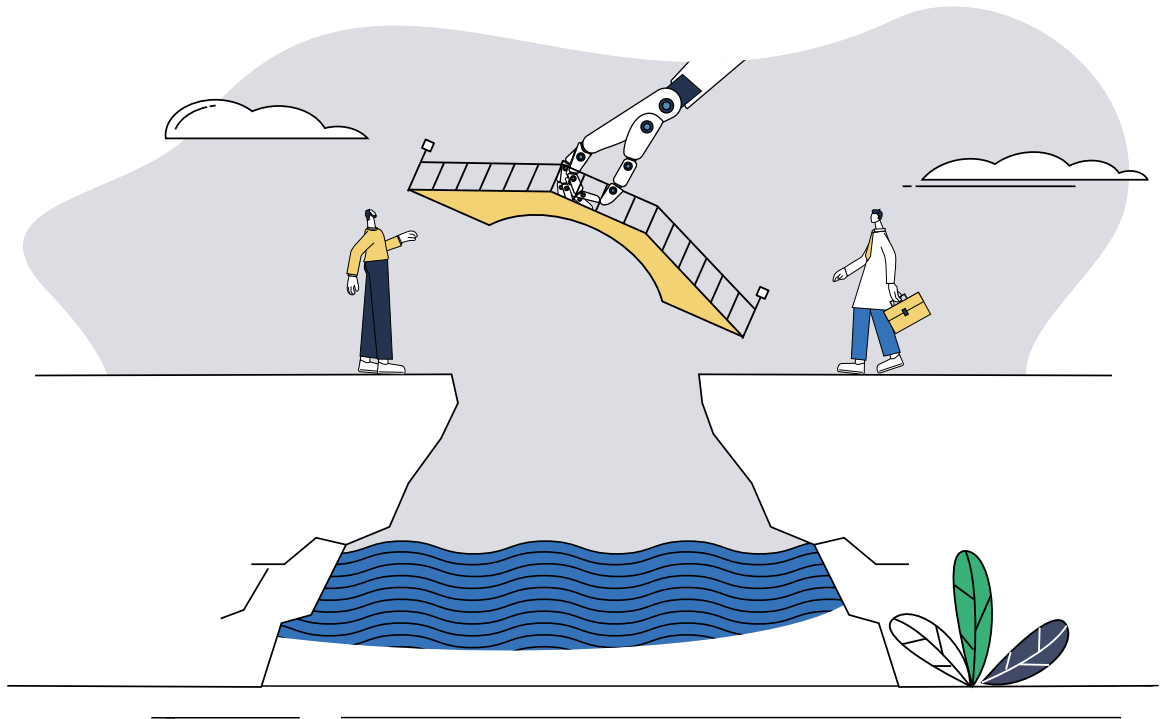
In December 2020, the practice implemented QliqSOFT's patient communications suite, which includes secure texting, chatbots, and virtual visits to improve workflows, as well as communications between providers and patients.

Chatbots are customized to each clinical and administrative case, including custom intake forms, to streamline new patient visits. Each of the medical group's 120-plus providers works in a unique way, and internal staff configure chatbot software using self-serve tools to reflect those unique workflows.

Patients use these digital self-service tools to complete check-in forms and access test results. They also use chatbots to discuss pre- and post-visit clinical concerns and outcomes with physicians or other clinical staff.

These self-service features reduce patient wait times. Patients often arrive late, and paperwork further delays appointments, causing overflowing waiting areas where patients have compromised immune symptoms—not to mention frustrated patients and stressed care teams. Staff now





coordinate patient outreach activities, setting up auto-reminders to schedule visits or pick up prescriptions, escalating concerns to doctors, forwarding required documentation to patients traveling internationally, remotely monitoring a patient's condition, and much more.

Significant ROI

Within 10 months of implementation at 24 clinics and establishing individual physician workflows, FCN experienced a return on investment (ROI) of greater than 10 times over. FCN has rolled out the technology to 36 locations.


By streamlining physician workflows, the practice saved 8 to 10 minutes per patient

visit—without compromising care quality. Those time savings equated to two or three additional patient appointments per day at select practices, increasing revenue by 24%. Physicians also have the option to take that time back in their day to improve work-life balance. In small offices, digital check-in replaced one FTE at each location. Finally, patients embraced these new technologies, with 81% rating the medical group at 4.8 on a 5.0-point scale.

After these initial successes, the practice created Neuro2Go, a virtual consultation with a board-certified neurologist to discuss neurological conditions for patients and/or family members. In early 2022, FCN also launched a custom chatbot

to provide follow-up care to stroke patients, using artificial intelligence (AI) to query patients about their health status, symptoms, and other healthcare concerns.

The future is here, and we in the healthcare professions must adapt and serve patients online, which means forgoing our comfort with pens, paper, and clipboards. Initially, FCN providers were concerned that chatbots would be impersonal and difficult to use, but the results are amazing.

The biggest challenge in shifting to virtual care is facing our own fears. 

Jose Rocha, MHL, CPPM, CPC, is First Choice Neurology's director of central business office. **Krishna Kurapati, MS**, is founder and CEO, QliqSOFT, Inc.

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