

# Getting the message to patients

By Leslie Faughnan

Like every hospital in the state, St Vincent's University Hospital in Dublin has had a problem for years with managing outpatient appointments for its wide range of clinics. In essence, the rate of 'no-shows' or, as the hospital more politely records it, Did Not Attends (DNAs) could be up to 40 per cent.

The implications for the hospital are very serious in terms of wasted time by clinicians and other staff, and the related costs. A general HSE cost figure for each hospital DNA is about €80 per patient. Arguably, the closing out of appointment times for other patients might be an even more serious consequence.

A major step forward in solving, or at least alleviating, the problem is the Defero text messaging system which has recently finished a very successful three-month trial in St Vincent's. Developed by Dublin firm Grapevine Solutions, the Defero software links to the hospital's patient administration system. Appointment reminders are sent to outpatients by SMS or e-mail, initially at 15, ten and five-day intervals.

"We believe the most common cause is that people just forget the exact date and many of our patients simply do not use a diary," said Martina Corcoran, the IT department project manager for the trial. "Advance appointments are usually made when the patient is in a clinic; confirmation letters are posted of course. But, for a range of reasons, the level of non-attendance at appointments varies from around 15 per cent to over 40 per cent,



**Dermot Cullinan and Martina Corcoran of the St Vincent's IT team**

MAURA HICKEY

which is extremely wasteful of our limited resources."

Since St Vincent's sees around 143,000 outpatients annually in its various clinics, the average DNA rate of 23 per cent represents almost 30,000 missed appointments, and suggests a cost through waste of the order of €2 million-plus.

"We piloted the text messaging system in two of our busiest clinics, ENT and urology," Corcoran said. "The non-attendance figure for patients on the SMS system dropped to just 8 per cent over the period."

Dermot Cullinan, head of ITR, said that Defero messaging was just one element of a combined effort between the clinical and administrative teams.

"We used poster campaigns, leaflets and reminders to patients in order to emphasise the importance of keeping appointments or re-scheduling them and, of course, making it easy to do that. As part of that we invited patients to opt in to the SMS scheme, so that we

had their permission and their interest."

But he said that the Defero system was the new star of the show, linked to the patient system so that the reminders were automatic, accurate and accurately targeted.

"We have already decided to roll it out as the key part of a co-operative programme across all outpatient clinics with an ambitious but, we believe, realistic target of bringing non-attendance down to a 5 per cent level."

While the Defero system was an investment primarily targeted at outpatient DNA rates, it is envisaged that it will be used for other communications purposes throughout the hospital. Staff notifications or alerts, for example, can be automatically generated or sent speedily to specific groups such as clinical staff on call, or if required in emergency situations. Ad hoc requirements for messages to patients or staff can be sent using a simple web interface.