

The use of name and address spirit masters in general practice

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SUMMARY. The use of an address master system in a general practice can save the doctors and secretarial staff a significant amount of time. A spirit master system (e.g. 'Scriptomaster' sets) best suits the requirements of general practice. Uses include labelling documents, request forms, prescriptions, envelopes and compiling lists of patients.

The desirability of reducing the clerical work of the general practitioner is well recognised. One frequent repetitive clerical task is the transcription of the patient's name and details. This paper outlines possible solutions to this problem and describes the use of spirit or hectocarbon masters as a simple, cheap practical answer.

Possible approaches

There are two possible approaches to the problem. The first involves the preparation of adhesive labels printed with the patient's name and details. These can be gummed or self-adhesive and may be produced by typing with carbons (sets of adhesive labels with interleaved carbons are commercially available), by using a master plate or stencil as described below or as output from a computer.

The labels are stored with the patient's records and are retrieved as required and stuck on the appropriate documents or forms. In the second approach a master card or plate is prepared for each patient. The patient's particulars are then transferred from this card on to the documents or forms only as required.

In our experience the first approach using adhesive labels is less appropriate in general practice for the following reasons. The number of labels required per patient per year may range from 0–100 or more and it is not possible to predict in advance the number of labels required for each patient. Thus the wastage of unused labels may be high and where printed labels for a particular patient are exhausted delays may occur in the preparation of further labels. Storage of labels on the scale required in a large general practice may also be a problem. Moreover, the proportion of patients whose particulars change is about ten per cent a year. This may present problems as it is difficult to ensure that all the incorrect and out-of-date labels are removed from the case record and replaced by new ones. The second approach was, therefore, further explored.

Use of master plates or cards

Three possible options exist, the use of embossed cards, the use of stencil masters, or the use of spirit masters.

(1) Embossed cards

Embossed cards are made of metal or plastic with raised letters. They have the disadvantage that special equipment is required for their production and each doctor or receptionist at the point of use must also have the appropriate equipment. Moreover the position on the form which can be marked with the name and particulars is limited and this is a disadvantage where forms are not standardised.

Embossed cards have the advantage that if forms with multiple copies on pressure-sensitive paper are used, both the forms and the copies are marked simultaneously. The cards are more or less permanent but this is not necessarily an advantage in general practice.

(2) *Stencil masters*

These work on the same principle as stencils used in conventional ink duplicators (e.g. as made by Roneo or Gestetner). A small stencil which can take about five lines of information comes mounted on paper or plastic frames and the name and details of the patient is typed on the stencil. This may be done with a standard typewriter usually with an attachment to take the cards. Equipment used to transfer the name and address from the stencil to paper can range from small manually operated units to sophisticated electrically operated systems. As ink is used the master card must be protected if filed in the case record folder. For practical purposes there is no limit to the number of addresses that can be taken from any one master card.

(3) *Hectograph spirit masters*

With this system there is no need for embossing, inking or drying. The patient's particulars are typed using a standard typewriter without any additional attachments on to master paper backed with a sheet of hectocarbon. After typing the carbon is discarded. The master labels may be typed in strips, separated and then stuck individually on aperture cards of various shapes or inserted into plastic frames. Alternatively, cards may be used which are supplied with master

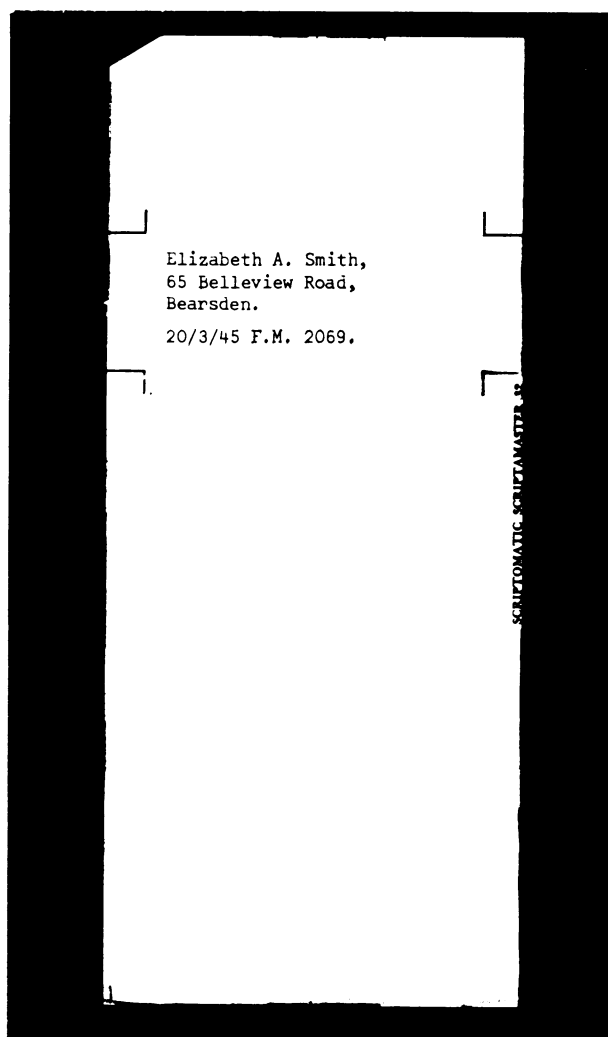


Figure 1. Scriptomatic scriptamaster card. (Bradma Ltd.)

paper and with hectocarbon attached. After the card is typed the hectocarbon strip is detached and discarded. To transfer the patient's name and details to the document or form, the appropriate section of the document is moistened with spirit, the master card held against the document and pressure applied. Equipment available ranges from simple hand-operated with a pressure roller and a spirit-moistened pad to more sophisticated desk-mounted and electric equipment. The number of imprints that can be taken from any one card does not usually exceed 200.

System chosen

A spirit hectograph system using aperture cards with spirit masters already attached was selected (Scriptamaster, Bradma Ltd.—figure 1). It has been used successfully in a practice of 5,100 patients for a period of over two years. This system was chosen because:

- (1) The cost was low. The cost per card complete was 1·9p.
- (2) No special equipment is required to prepare the masters. The cards are typed with a standard typewriter or handwritten.
- (3) No expensive equipment is required to transfer the patient's particulars from the master to the appropriate form or document. Small handrollers with moistening pads were used by the secretaries (cost £15). The doctors in the practice used a small piece of gauze moistened with spirit and pressure applied from the thumb.
- (4) Storage is no problem. The cards (19 cm. × 8 cm.) could be stored directly in the case folders without protection and without appreciably adding to the thickness of the folder; 120 cards could be contained in an additional inch of filing. This compares, for example, to 20 cards to the inch in one popular stencil card system.
- (5) There is no restriction on the position on the form to which the name and address was transferred.

The fact that each master card can be used on only 200 occasions did not prove a disadvantage. In the rare instance where more copies are required a second card can be quickly prepared.

The address masters are kept in the patient's record folder so that they are immediately available to the doctor or the secretary. Alternatively, they can be kept separately in a file where they may double as a master list or index of the patients in the practice.

Uses of address master systems

The system has proved itself extremely useful in a busy general practice by saving a considerable amount of secretarial and doctor time and by improving the efficiency of the practice. Its uses have included:

- (1) Labelling the patient's files and documentation on registration of a new patient,
- (2) Completing laboratory request forms as required,
- (3) Heading prescriptions,
- (4) Completing other documentation for the patient as necessary, e.g. notification of change of address to the Health Board, heading continuation sheets,
- (5) Preparing lists of patients with specific diseases or other characteristic. This listing facility has been used in the practice with a punched feature card information retrieval system which has been described elsewhere (Harden, Harden, and Reekie, 1974). For example, all patients at serious risk from influenza were identified and their names and addresses printed on to envelopes from the master cards. A letter was then sent to the patients offering them vaccination. It was thus possible to write to a specified group of patients in the practice with the minimum of trouble.

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REFERENCE

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