Docs don't like their patients using the 'Net
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First the good news: Most physicians are Internet savvy. Now the bad news: It seems many physicians dislike the Internet and are concerned about the way their patients are surfing through healthcare Web sites.

Several studies – albeit mostly American - indicate that Web usage by physicians has grown exponentially in the last few years. A Harris Interactive poll from March 2001 found only 7 per cent of physicians do not use the Internet.

The Harris Interactive study, "Computing in the Physicians' Practice," found 93 per cent of physicians are online, either at home, in their personal office area, in clinical work area or a combination of the above. Sixty four per cent who are online use the Internet daily; while 59 per cent of all physicians use the Internet daily.

The survey found more than half (55 per cent) use e-mail to communicate with colleagues and 34 per cent use e-mail to communicate with support staff. Only 13 per cent use e-mail to communicate with patients.

Dr. Paul Gorman is one physician who has seen the evolution of Web usage among physicians. An Assistant Professor at the Division of Medical Informatics and Outcomes Research at Oregon Health and Sciences University in Portland, Oregon, Dr. Gorman has been teaching information technology to physicians since before the Web era began.

"At first (in 1995), the physicians in our courses had very little experience with computers in general," he says. "More recently, the World Wide Web is very familiar to nearly all of them. They no longer ask "What is the Internet and how can I get connected?" Nowadays they are saying, "I've been there, done that. Now show me
how it can be useful for medical practice."

Dr. Gorman believes most physicians have access to and use the Internet and that statistics for Internet use and Web site preferences among physicians match those of non-physicians with otherwise similar demographics. "I'd guess that most physicians use the Internet, but only infrequently, for medical practice."

Dr. Jochen R. Moehr, a professor at the School of Health Information Science at the
University of Victoria in Victoria, BC, agrees. He conducted a study on Internet usage in 1997 for the British Columbia Medical Association.

"At that time already, we found that the Internet was quite popular with physicians, almost independent of age, type of practice, gender, etc. However, it appeared that the Internet was more used for non-medical purposes than for medical ones," Dr. Moehr says.

"The main limitiing factor for Web usage is whether (physicians) have broadband access in the office or not," says Dr. Alan Brookstone, a Richmond, BC family physician who is constantly online. "Until physicians have universal access to broadband, there's a limit as to what they can do."

Another Harris Interactive survey, released last August found the majority of physicians still rate physician-focused Web sites as average or below average in terms of use and overall comprehensiveness. The 101 physicians responding to the survey clearly indicated they are not fully satisfied with medical information on the Internet, with only 12 per cent stating that current offerings are "excellent" in terms of providing accurate and credible information that doctors can rely on.

Conducted for merckmedicus.com, the survey found only 37 per cent of physicians gave the typical Web site a positive rating. Just over half of physicians (52 per cent) said that poor performance in terms of ease of navigation keeps them from using the Internet as often as they would like in their practices. And 60 per cent of physicians said the absence of advertising on a medical Web site enhances the credibility of that site.

The bad news for Web proponents continues: The Medical Post's 2000 National Survey of Doctors found only 23 per cent of Canadian doctors strongly agree the Internet will improve physician/patient communication in the next five years. It also showed that while 64 per cent of physicians are very or extremely interested in going online to gather information about drugs in the next 12 months, only 15 per cent want to send e-mail to patients, only 16 per cent are interested in writing prescriptions online and 31 per cent are interested in filing billing info online.

As well, the Ipsos-Reid conducted survey found 61 per cent of physicians are "somewhat suspicious" of information patients find on the Web. And a British study, conducted last year by the Cancer Research UK London Psychosocial Group, concluded only two thirds of doctors considered Internet health information to be usually (20 per cent) or sometimes (48 per cent) reliable.

What's more, an April 2000 report by Forrester Research titled "Why Doctors Hate the Net," found doctors see e-mail as an additional burden on an already overburdened schedule (then again, many professionals outside medicine would likely share those sentiments).

Not all the news is bad, though: A survey released in March by MD Consult among MD Consult users, found online medical information service significantly improves physicians' ability to resolve patient care questions.

And even though doctors indicate some reluctance to engage in widespread e-mail communications with patients, 55 per cent do recommend certain credible Web sites to patients, a Deloitte Research and Fulcrum Analysis telephone survey of 1,200 practicing U.S. physicians found.

While there is much health information that is inaccurate on the Net, Dr. Tom Ferguson, a senior research fellow for online health at the Pew Internet and American Life Project in Washington, DC and publisher of The Ferguson Report, notes that physicians who ignore it may do so at their peril,

"Health profesionals who continue to believe that their patients are inherently incapable of navigating the plentiful health resources of the Internet will find their Net-savvy patients leaving them for other doctors. By contrast, those wise and caring healers who realize that we may have just as much to learn from our patients as they from us should do very well indeed."

In his Ten Rules for Online Health Professionals, Dr. Ferguson advises healthcare professionals to jump into the Net and get comfortable with the online medium. Respect and cultivate "smart patients," he says. "Physicians are now encountering significant competition from the customer: Smart patients who have "gone to medical school" on the Internet." Ferguson says physicians should not be affronted or embarrassed by them, take them seriously, encourage them to learn all they can and learn from them. "They will save you a great deal of time, trouble and embarrassment."

Learn about and visit online support communities. And understand the dangers of not going online, Dr. Ferguson says. "Providers who choose not to respond to their patients' growing demand for online communication will lose market share to Net-savvy competitors. Those the resist the idea of communicating online with patients may find their practices increasingly limited to older patients and others without online links."