

From House Calls to Mouse Calls



*How the Internet is shaping
doctor-patient relationships in the new millennium*

By Jennifer Halperin

House calls, it seems, have become a thing of the past—gone the way of the milkman and the telegram. Ironically, though, they might be making a twenty-first-century-style comeback of sorts, thanks to technological advancements and the now-common use of the Internet.

Gone are the days of the family doctor with his medical bag arriving at a house in the middle of the night to care for a feverish child or deliver a baby. But the possibilities for increased, more convenient communication and interaction are among the many ways the Internet is affecting the practice of medicine in modern times. Doctors' offices can schedule patients' appointments, keep track of patients' health

histories, share test results with patients and other medical experts, and even prescribe drugs through the Internet. Patients can educate themselves about medical conditions, surgical procedures and treatment options from various medically oriented web sites. They also can visit individual hospitals' web sites to learn such specifics as directions to facilities and which insurance companies the hospitals have managed-care agreements with.

For example, OhioHealth, a network of hospitals in central Ohio, is working on building a secure e-mail communications system so that doctors can log on to home or office computers and communicate with patients directly about symptoms and other

medical information. Adrienne Shinn, manager of web development and new media, is charged with helping the network to improve doctor-patient relationships through the Internet while also preserving patient privacy.

"The web has really put the power of health care and health-care decisions into the patients' hands," Shinn says "They feel in control, and not helpless. If a patient is told he has cancer, he can say, 'Here's 10 courses I know exist.' They can work on a course of treatment together. In the past, doctors would just choose the course of treatment."

But the ease of fingertip access has to be balanced with a good deal of caution, Shinn notes. While patients can access legitimate medical information via many web sites, and thereby engage in constructive and informed dialogue when they enter doctors' offices, some patients have a tendency to try to use information gleaned from all kinds of sites—including individual patients' personal sites—to self-diagnose. Sometimes, this can be a prescription for panic based on misinformation.

And while the Internet offers a way to obtain prescription drugs and medical test information with ease, kinks in the system exist. For example, Kaiser Permanente—the nation's second-largest health plan, with 8 million members—learned that firsthand in July when a technical glitch on its web site resulted in the personal health information of about 858 members being e-mailed accidentally to 19 other members.

Meanwhile, state medical boards across the country are cracking down on physicians who prescribe drugs over the Internet—sometimes to patients they have never met, let alone examined. A Dublin, Ohio, physician recently pleaded guilty to illegally mailing medicines to patients. He was charged with selling drugs without a

pharmacy license and was placed on probation for two years after agreeing to give up his medical license and pay a fine.

The federal government has joined several states in trying to crack down on similar “cyberprescriber” operations, which often traffic in so-called “embarrassment” drugs such as Viagra or the hair-growth drug Propecia. The Texas attorney general has gone so far as to sue two online pharmacy web sites, ExpressToday.com and MedPrescribe.com, for endangering customers by selling potentially harmful drugs online.

Once such challenges have been overcome—or at least anticipated and guarded against—consumers and health-care professionals likely will find the Internet has much good to offer. Mary Yost, vice president of public affairs for the Ohio Hospital Association, describes a number of web-based programs that can serve as time-saving tools for medical personnel and consumers.

A number of web sites, such as healthgrades.com and healthscape.com, offer quality report cards that purport to help people learn how well various hospitals rank on various services. A service known as MOO, for Medical Opportunities in Ohio, run by the OHA, tries to help link physicians looking for employment with hospitals that often have a hard time recruiting doctors. Another program in the works, Yost says, aims to save time and money for medical staff and facilities by offering continuing education requirements online. Currently, such classes often require people to travel great distances and stay overnight in hotels to fulfill their professions’ ongoing learning requirements. The program would also be set up to track classes taken and requirements fulfilled by individuals.

One of the most medically relevant ways the Internet can help patients, Shinn says, is by aiding physicians in tracking their records. Doing so can help avoid prescribing medications someone is allergic to, and can track trends over the years in a patient’s condition, she says.

And on the lighter side, the Internet has allowed a patient’s family and friends to be involved in some of the brighter spots of medical care. Many hospitals can beam infants’ photos from their nurseries into loved ones’ homes and offer light-hearted greeting cards to be sent to patients over

the web. They also can allow patients to save time and ease frustration by registering for hospital stays via computer.

“The hospital can save people from having to go through a lot of rigmarole,” Yost says. “It can call up a patient’s information, including insurance, medical history, old X-rays. It’s better for everyone.”

In the future, health-care professionals expect the Internet to become even more commonly used, especially as secure means of transmitting data between doctors and patients are configured. “It’s an amazing resource,” Shinn says. “It’s going to end up adding to the amount of information that everyone is armed with.” ■