Patient Education and the Internet

Topic of the Month

In the previous Topic of the Month we described how the Internet is dramatically altering the way patients seek and obtain health information. In this piece, we describe how the Internet is affecting patients, physicians, and their relationship. Physicians should be aware of the impact of this new mode of health education on their patients, and they need to aid patients in navigating through the information to choose the proper health care option.

As patients learn how to access, research, and evaluate medical information, the traditional information gap between the patient and physician has begun to fade. Patients become more capable of making choices regarding their health care treatment options. The responsibility of physicians is to discern each patient's sophistication with the Internet and ability to search and evaluate online health care information.

Responding to patients

Information from the Internet complements, rather than replaces, information provided by one's physician. Surveys show that patients who use the Internet still prefer to receive health and medical information from their own physicians (Miller TE, 1998). When used appropriately, a patient's computer research can actually save time during an appointment and increase the effectiveness of the physician's diagnosis.

Physicians may be apprehensive of patients bringing stacks of printouts from their Internet research. They should reasonably restrict the number of printouts they will review for patients by asking them to prioritize the materials.

Responding to patients' health-related inquiries is a sensitive issue. Physicians should be careful not to trivialize or dismiss any information that patients gather. Instead, they should commend patients for trying to learn about their medical conditions, allow patients time to share or question what they've found, and respond to the information without overreacting, even if the information is flawed.

If patients favor a certain treatment based on what they've read, then physicians need to provide additional information and education on the options and implications of the alternative treatment options. In explaining the benefits, risks, and appropriateness of different treatments, physicians can suggest websites that they feel are credible and supportive. While counseling the patient on treatment options, the physician should document the discussion for future reference.

When a patient presents printouts to their physician, the validity and quality of the information needs to be assessed. George Lundberg, MD, Editor-in-Chief at Medscape and CBS Healthwatch, recommends looking for four core standards: the credentials of authors and contributors, relevant copyright information, "website" ownership disclosure, and the date of posting (Silberg, Lundberg, JAMA, April 16, 1997). Guidelines to evaluate health-related websites and health information include: Health on the Net Foundation Code of Conduct (HONcode), www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html, Guidelines for Medical and Health Information Sites on the Internet, www.ama-

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assn.org/about/guidelines.htm, eHealth Code of Ethics, www.ihealthcoalition.org/ethics/ehcode.html, and Ethical Principles for Offering Internet Health Services to Consumers, www.hiethics.org/Principles/index.asp.

Recommending websites

Finding high quality, peer-reviewed information on the Internet to recommend to patients may seem daunting to many physicians. Sites developed by government agencies, professional and voluntary associations, leading clinical centers, and universities are useful places to refer patients. Commercial sites, such as Medscape or drkoop.com, also provide credible information. We have listed some high quality sites below. (Items in the list of References marked with an asterisk (*) contain reviews of websites recommended for patients by the expert authors.)

Many different types of patient education resources exist on the Internet. Websites often feature expert-moderated frequently asked questions, or FAQs, where patients can view responses to questions posted by others or themselves. To improve a patient's understanding of certain clinical terms, physicians can refer their patients to several online glossaries, including drkoop.com, www.drkoop.com/conditions/ency/index.html, or the Merriam Webster Medical Dictionary, available at InteliHealth, www.intelihealth.com/IH/.

Well-educated patients who are capable of critically evaluating literature can be referred to specific online journals, such as JAMA or the New England Journal of Medicine, to access abstracts. If patients wish to search a wide range of medical journals, their physician can refer them to The National Library of Medicine's resource, Pub Med, www.pubmed.gov. Patients can enter search terms relating to their condition and examine abstracts from the medical literature.

For physicians who treat patients with unusual and rare medical conditions, the Internet can serve as an extremely valuable resource. Support groups and information not readily available in local medical communities may exist. Physicians can search the Internet, interpret the content and quality of selected websites, and inform patients of valuable online resources during their next visit or by e-mail.

The medical practice should determine which health care professionals become involved with counseling patients on the use of the Internet; for example, whether counseling is restricted to physicians only. At this time there are no national guidelines on how to counsel patients regarding the Internet, who should do it, or what training is required.

Physicians and their staff will have to evaluate their particular patient population to ascertain common Internet counseling needs. To assist patients' online searches, physicians can establish printed information handouts with reliable websites and criteria to help patients evaluate information on Internet.

General concerns

Existing financial and time constraints during a patient visit limit the role of Internet counseling. Compensation is one critical factor: managed care companies and insurers have been reluctant to reimburse physicians and other health care professionals for time spent educating patients on the Internet. Payers need to determine whether the extra time spent improves the quality of patient care and reduces costs sufficiently to justify

additional compensation as a separate billable service for physicians and health care professionals.

As health-related content on the Internet expands, physicians must be increasingly attentive and receptive to patient's efforts to educate themselves. Physicians need to communicate effectively with their patients to help them make the best use of online information.

Weblinks for physicians to recommend to patients

Adam.com

http://www.adam.com

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

http://www.aacap.org/info_families

American Academy of Family Physicians

http://www.familydoctor.org

American Academy of Pediatrics

http://www.aap.org

American Cancer Society

http://www.cancer.org

American Diabetes Association

http://www.diabetes.org

drkoop.com

http://www.drkoop.com

HealthCentral.com

http://www.healthcentral.com/home/home.cfm

KidsGrowth.com

http://www.kidsgrowth.com

OnHealth

http://www.onhealth.com

MEDline Plus (through the National Institutes of Health)

http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/healthtropics.html

Medscape http://www.medscape.com

WebMD

http://www.wedmd.com

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http://www.cyberdialogue.com/pdfs/wp/wp-cch-1999-doctors.pdf

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Three-minute round: what is the impact of the Internet on the physician-patient relationship? Medical Crossfire. July 2000:2(7):41-5.
http://www.medicalcrossfire.com

Winkler K. E-Healthcare for your patients – when what they find is bad for them. Physician Practice Digest. Jan./Feb. 2001.

http://www.physicianspractice.com/

*Indicates that article recommends specific websites