

Views and Practice

Internet: blessing or nightmare for medical practitioner?

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Nowadays, it is not uncommon to encounter patients who have done some research on the internet, and ask about new medical treatments. Some even demand the use of new treatments upon entering the consultation room. Those of us who have started practicing medicine before the advent of internet may feel uneasy, since gone were the days when doctors were the main medical information providers. Years ago, patients relied mainly on their doctors for medical information and advice.

What is the present situation? Internet indeed facilitates the rapid exchange of knowledge. Searching for information has never been so easy and so convenient. Simply with a few keystrokes, you can instantly get what you are looking for. If you want to look for the side-effects or dosage of a particular drug, go to "Epocrates" website, which offers information on most drugs including safety use of a drug during pregnancy or lactation. "Epocrates" has an additional beauty by providing information on multiple drugs interaction, which is crucial in treating patients who are on multiple drugs. This function from the internet is not

available in any printed drug books. This illustrates how the new electronic technology surpasses the traditional printed version. Going to library, flipping through pages of the "Index Medicus" for writing up research papers has become history. Now, all these information are readily available from the internet. Through the splendor of internet technology, patients can also obtain instant and free medical information with ease. They can google their illness, and are able to get in depth responses for free. Internet does increase patient awareness of their medical problems. If used wisely, it could save a lot of physician time, especially in health or disease education. Patient may be more cooperative if they better understand their own problems.

However, we should not forget the other side of the coin. Some medical information available from the internet is often fragmented and inaccurate. Many of the materials you get from internet are commercially linked. Some may be soft advertisement under disguise in form of authoritative medical advice. Among the most popular searching engines, such as Google or Yahoo, paid clients get priority in the placement of search results, i.e. the link of paid clients are put in the front row and this explains why one easily gets biased or uncontrolled information from the internet. Moreover, the accuracy of the internet information is unchecked. Information in the "Wikipedia" is sometimes wrong. Receiving and believing in false information may be worse than being ignorant.

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One major problem evolving from internet medical information is self-diagnosis. Patients often relate a trivial symptom to a severe and rare disease. A good example is taking everyone with facial rash as lupus erythematosus. People do not know that medicine is an art of chance calculation. Medical diagnosis is based on probability, not possibility. Self-diagnosis very often leads to unnecessary anxiety or irrelevant self-treatment, which can be damaging.

Another side-effect of internet search for medical information is the request for inappropriate treatments. Based on the information that they get from the internet, which is sometimes partial or incomplete, patients often pressurize their physicians for treatments which are inappropriate or not yet scientifically proven. That creates conflict between doctors and their patients and jeopardizes doctor-patient relationship.

So is internet a nightmare or a blessing for doctors? I think the answer is not a simple yes or no. Internet is a technology one cannot ignore.

No matter you like it or not, it has become part of our lives. To face this kind of situation, my advice is to be positive. We should take advantage of its strengths and beware of its limitations and drawbacks. Do not let the internet surfers dictate your practice. Our practice should be evidence-based, not internet-based.

Today, we need to safeguard our patients from getting lost in the rapidly advancing sea of information technology. As doctors are no longer the sole medical knowledge providers, we have an additional role to help patients filtering the overwhelming medical information in this era of internet. We have a duty to provide them a fair and realistic view of the medical advances. Subsequently, we may be able to assist them to make the wise choice and to safeguard their health and their pockets.

After all, a doctor's role needs to be adjusted. Not only are we medical information providers, but also reliable and trustworthy medical information gatekeepers.