

Ethical rules don't change when medicine moves to Web



**Tech
Talk**

By H. Jay Wisnicki, MD

Internet can expand a practice, but patient privacy is still essential

Many ophthalmologists view the Internet as a tool to broaden their practices by offering on-line eye-care advice. However, it is important to remember that using the Internet does not exonerate the physician

from good ethical requirements. In fact, the broad base of the Web encourages a stricter adherence to solid ethical qualities.

Health information has the unique property of being able to help as well as harm the patient. Good solid information, dispensed accurately and properly, can enhance a person's health. That same information, dispensed in a shoddy manner, can do serious harm.

It is important that patients can look to their Internet information sources as

After all, they are one and the same.

In addition, when you gather patient information over the Internet, you must be sure the patient understands who sees that information, what it is being used for, and how it is being used. Too often, patients don't understand that their health-care information is as valuable to them as their financial information. You must ensure that their information is secure.

You must let users know if information is being collected for any purpose.

If you have an outside vendor running your site, ask what information is being gathered and by whom, what uses that information will have, and any possibilities that the information will be sent to third parties. Insist the vendor disclose this information on the site or not use gathered information. Your obligation is to the patient, not the vendor.

Disclose interests

As an information provider, you also have an obligation to disclose any factors that could influence your information. Stock analysts must disclose if they have a vested interest in a company they are reporting on and the

same should hold true in health care. If you receive financial benefits from one type of procedure or referral, tell your patients.

When you make a recommendation, the patient sees it as an endorsement. Be willing to stand behind your advice. Unfortunately, with online consultations, it is impossible to read facial expressions to see fully if the patient understands what you are saying.

Your Web site should state clearly

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reliable and accurate. Patients must be certain that the content's quality is high and that their own information is kept private.

Online health-care providers have a responsibility to disclose to patients the constraints of online diagnosis and treatment recommendations. Obviously, you cannot prescribe medications online, nor can you be certain of a patient's condition without a proper examination. However, you can narrow the possibilities down and give the patient a good starting point.

There are other factors that enter into dispensing medicine on the Internet. Physicians must disclose any outside factors that could influence the site's content, such as advertising, co-op shares, etc. In addition, patients must be made aware that there are risks associated with sharing health information online. Internet users are often concerned about the privacy of their credit card information, but they should be equally concerned that their health information is secure.

It is incumbent upon the health-care provider to ensure that patient privacy is safeguarded. Health-care providers must be wary about who sees patient information and guard Internet information as closely as patient records.

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who owns it, what its purpose is, and how to contact the owner and/or person responsible for the site's content. Ideally, you should have a feedback section where users can e-mail you by clicking in one specific area. Questions you receive about site content should be addressed in a quick, professional manner. Remember, the Internet is for quick correspondence. Establish a turnaround time for answering questions and stick to it.

If you carry advertising on your site, you *must* differentiate it from educational content. Do not assume patients can tell the difference.

If you are providing general health information, such as from a trade journal or a study, get permission and then attribute the source. Cite any publications, including date and version num-

ber if necessary. If you link to other sites, remember, you are endorsing the content on them. Check them often to ensure you still want to do that.

Let your users evaluate your site. You may think you have the greatest site in the world, but your patients may think otherwise. Take their views into consideration. You do not have to use all their suggestions, but often the users will have ideas you or your webmaster never thought about.

Your patients have a right to know your credentials. Have a page on your site that outlines them. You hang your medical school diploma on your office wall, why not advertise your education and experience on your Web site?

Remember, when you provide information over the Internet, you are just extending your office walls. Your main goal must remain to serve patients' needs while protecting their confidentiality. Medical ethics do not go away

with the addition of a modem. Instead, they are more critical since the patient and doctor often will never meet face to face.

A Web site and online consultation can be a lucrative method for getting your name out, visiting with patients, and building a larger practice. However, make sure that despite the change in medium, your message remains the same: "I am a high-quality health-care provider who puts my patients first." ♣

Patients enroll in clinical trials via Web sites

FROM STAFF REPORTS

NEW YORK—Pharmaceutical and biotech companies are expanding their reach for recruitment of patients for their clinical trials by using the Internet, according to a report in *The New York Times*.

Since October, four Web sites, which are financed by venture capital firms, have been launched: *emergingmed.com*, *veritasmedicine.com*, *americadoctor.com*, and *acurian.com*.

Patients can enroll for free, and private companies pay a nominal fee for a reference for the common medical problems and substantially more for potential candidates with rare diseases, the report stated.

Problems with informed consent, however, can arise, because most patients may not know the purpose of the specific trial that they wish to enroll in.

"It's clear that patients enter primarily for therapeutic benefit," said Paul Helft, MD, a professor of medicine at the University of Chicago. "And the trials are not designed that way."

Clinical trial Web sites are not required to be reviewed by institutional review boards, so the language is not subjected to the same scrutiny from the FDA as print advertising for drug trials. The FDA ensures that information in print advertising meets federal standards of informed consent.

Patients may be afraid to ask their doctors about clinical trials and will find these Web sites helpful, one patient noted. ♣