

## Doctors develop tools to evaluate online health data

11/24/2003 5:00:00 PM - Medicircle would fit in Web browser's toolbar to consult databases



by Scott Foster

OTTAWA -- In the next five years, patients will be able to access their medical records online and instantly receive personalized diagnostic information with one click of the mouse, according to a leading expert on e-health applications.

Dr. Gunther Eysenbach, a senior scientist with the **University of Toronto's** Centre for Global eHealth Innovation, said the Internet will soon play a role in every step of the health-care delivery process. This includes patients having instant access to their medical records much like bank customers have online access to their statements and transaction history, he said.

"It's not that far away at all. The Internet will be everywhere," said Eysenbach, who recently presented "Health and the Internet: Junk, jewels, and true opportunities" at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Ottawa.

Such an online database of medical records would have to be heavily encrypted with some form of digital signature to ensure patient confidentiality, he said. Once a patient of the future logs on to a secure hospital network and views certain diagnostic results, they will be able to click on hyper-linked medical terms to access tailored background information that explains in detail what the diagnosis means, Eysenbach said.

Many patients already rely on the Internet to "get a second opinion and to read and understand better what the health professional told them in a face-to-face 10-minute consultation," he said. But "there's typically not enough time to explore issues in depth, and the Internet helps them to prepare questions for their next visit."

The problem that exists today is not a lack of electronic medical information. Rather, users are often challenged with finding "the right information" that specifically addresses their needs, he said. Another concern is whether the information is accurate and comes from a reliable source, he added.

To address some of these concerns, Eysenbach and his colleagues are working on several initiatives. One includes Medicircle, a software solution, or toolbar, that fits into a user's Web browser. When the user goes to a medical site, the toolbar automatically consults a few databases that instantly tell the user what trusted medical societies and organizations think about the site and whether they endorse it.

"It won't tell the consumer whether it's good or bad information, but it will help them evaluate it," said Eysenbach.

As well, staff at Toronto's Prince Margaret Hospital are working with cancer patients to teach them how to be more critical when evaluating various e-health information. One patient group is receiving courses as part of a trial project called I3MPACT. The courses teach users to evaluate health Web sites based on such criteria as whether a given site receives frequent updates, gives references, explicitly states its purpose and intentions, and discloses any possible conflicts of interest. Patients in the course will be compared to a similar group that hasn't received any such training to gauge the course's effectiveness, said Eysenbach. That study will wrap up in about a year.

"We need to train consumers on how to research health information, how to critically

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appraise it and how to separate the wheat from the chaff," he said.

As part of Dr. Eysenbach's vision for e-health, patients of the near future will look up a health professional on the Internet to see how trusted they are, as well as receive ratings for different hospitals. Many patients will also be able to make initial contact with doctors from home through video-conferencing or e-mail.

Meanwhile, Orillia Soldiers' Memorial Hospital is currently testing a software tool that would allow doctors to remotely access text-based patient information by logging on to the hospital's secure network. In doing so, hospital staff can quickly check up on a specific patient's progress. The system uses Secure Sockets Layer (SSL), which is the same protocol that banks use to send data over the Internet.

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