

FEATURE

Web offers peril, hope to patients, physicians

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Did you know that there's a special new inexpensive medicine that can cure virtually any sore throat within five minutes?!

That's right, you can find out more about this - and other inexpensive cure-alls for everything from small cancers to viral infections - on the World Wide Web at www.falseinfo.com!!

OK, so this sore throat treatment doesn't actually exist, and www.falseinfo.com - for all this newspaper knows - isn't the address of some phony pharmaceutical firm.

Unfortunately, however, if someone wanted to set up a Web site promoting phony treatments, he or she could do so fairly easily and defraud unsuspecting people desperate to end their pain.

With the explosion of personal computer use in the last two decades, the ever-growing popularity of the Web as an information source has inspired more and more people to surf the Internet in search of medical help. Some recent studies have stated that seeking medical information on the Web is now the No. 2 reason - behind seeking pornography - that people go online these days.

"(The Web's) almost becoming a little bit of a form of a second opinion," said Diane Marvin, MSN, RN, CS, director of educa-

tion at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira.

But Marvin cautioned that patients need to double-check everything they learn from the Web before making medical decisions based upon online information. That's a viewpoint shared by Dr. Paul P. Povanda, an osteopath at Horseheads Internal Medicine, a satellite clinic of St. Joseph's.

"The problem with the Web is that anybody can go on it," he said. "I think your patients should be very careful that they go to a legitimate site."

Indeed, a study by team of researchers from the University of Michigan published in the Aug. 1 issue of *Cancer* pointed out that there's good reason for patients to be cautious about where they turn for information on the Web.

The Michigan researchers reviewed 400 Web pages on Ewing's sarcoma - a rare form of bone cancer - for accuracy and other factors. The researchers wrote that of the Web sites reviewed, 42 percent contained information on medical treatments that had not been subject to stringent scientific review, and six percent of the sites contained inaccurate information.

In addition to the possibility of finding misleading information on the Web, Marvin said patients should also be careful before ordering prescription drugs online. For example, she said, some people may be tempted to order foreign pharmaceutical companies' drugs online because they are less expensive than those here in the United States.

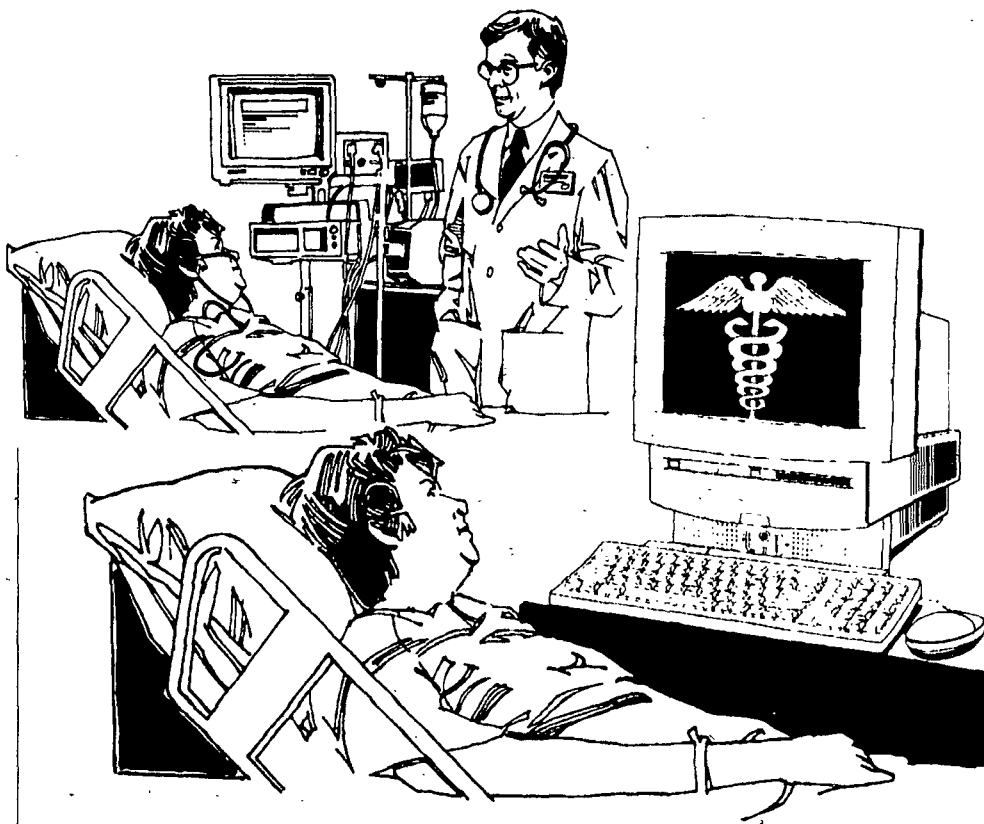
"I'd be very concerned when medicines come from another country, and not one of our labs where there are certain standards for purity and content," she said.

Marvin, stressed, however, that there are benefits for patients going on the Web. And she credited the easy access to medical information on the Web for patients being more aggressive in seeking various forms of treatment. That's a point echoed in an article on "The Internet in medicine," which appeared in the Jan. 15 edition of *Patient Care*.

"The patient education and self-care trends of the past 20 years have been accelerated by a technology that offers patients and consumers access to nearly all of the same medical information used by physicians," wrote the article's team of authors. "Especially when patients have unusual or rare conditions, (a doctor) may find that they have a more current, if superficial, understanding of etiology or treatment options."

According to Marvin, Povanda and a number of other medical sources, patients should ask certain questions and follow certain procedures before making decisions based on Web information:

- When looking for Web sites, try to find those created by reputable health organi-



zations. You can ask your own doctor about such organizations, or find them by visiting the U.S. government's clearinghouse for medical Web site information called "Healthfinder." You can reach it at <http://www.healthfinder.gov/>. Povanda noted that Healthfinder only has links to quality health-care sites. (See gray box for more information.)

- Even seemingly accurate information should be discussed with your personal physician.

"Speak with your own physician, and tell them what you've found before you do anything," Povanda said.

- If possible, print out any information you think is useful, and show it to your primary caregiver. If you can't print it out,

write it down and note the source.

- Be cautious before spending any money on medical products sold on the Web. In particular, companies offering panaceas or cure-all products may be out to defraud you.

Marvin said that patients who once would have gone to medical libraries for information on their diseases are now turning to the Web for information. That's fine as long as they check out everything they find for accuracy, she said.

"The Web should be just another tool as the library was 10 years ago," she said, a point echoed by Povanda.

"I think (the Web's) just another source where they can bring me questions and we can discuss things," he said.

Web site list

The following Web sites were recommended as good sources of medical information, or links to other reputable Web sites:

- Health on the Net Foundation at <http://www.hon.ch>. This site monitors other medical Web sites for credibility and posts links to the ones it finds most credible.

- MayoClinic Health Oasis at <http://www.mayoclinic.org>. Users can send questions via electronic mail to Mayo physicians.

- RxList at <http://www.rxlist.com>. This site allows users to look up detailed information about drugs.

- Wellness Web at <http://wellweb.com>. This site contains information on alternative and conventional medicines.

- For information on cancer, you can visit <http://cancernet.nci.nih.gov>, run by the National Cancer Institute, and <http://www.cancer.org>, run by the American Cancer Society.

- Healthfinder, the U.S. government's Web site clearinghouse for medical information online at <http://www.healthfinder.gov/>.

THE HEALTH ASSOCIATION

One Mt. Hope Ave.
Rochester, NY 14620

Voice/Relay
716-423-9490

Fax
716-546-7328

Where People Find Solutions.

ripa

ROCHESTER INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE ASSOCIATION, INC.
2000 Winton Road South
Building I, Suite 201 • Rochester, NY 14618
242-0610

THOMAS L. MAHONEY, M.D.
PRESIDENT

JOHN W. OBERLIES
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

CROSSBRIDGE PHYSICIANS, P.C

2000 Winton Road South • Rochester, NY 14618
Building I, Suite 201
Phone 256-3040

ROBERT W. EMMENS, M.D.
PRESIDENT

JOHN W. OBERLIES
MANAGER