



Online with your doctor

Can you e-mail your MD?
Check lab results online?
Some lucky patients say 'Yes!'
—and maybe you can too

By Julie Deardorff | Tribune health and fitness reporter

Chicago dermatologist Candace Thrash isn't a techie, but she does have her own interactive Web site for patients, something just half the nation's physicians can say.

On it, you can schedule or cancel an appointment, refill a prescription and print those tedious patient-history forms, which can be filled out at your leisure in Starbucks. You also can buy eye cream at 4 a.m. and scan a short bio on Thrash, who recently had her second child. If you're scheduled for surgery, you can read pre- and post-operative instructions at your convenience.

"I had no idea how much labor was involved in getting one of these off the ground," Thrash confessed in an e-mail to friends and relatives when announcing the debut of the site, innovative-dermatology.com. "I feel like I have given birth all over again!"

In a way, Thrash has; she considers her Web site a living entity that requires constant care and attention. It's a reflection of her practice, she said, and it's designed for what she thinks today's patients really want: connectivity and convenience.

Unlike the banking, restaurant and travel industries, the medical profession has been slow to embrace the Internet's potential customer service benefits. But despite concerns about patient privacy, costs and time constraints, a growing number of physicians are encouraging patients to go online to do things such as check lab results and immunization records, request refills and appointments, and e-mail their physicians with non-urgent medical questions.

'Fifty percent of people say their physicians don't have Web sites; 80 percent wish they did.'

—John Ryan, founder and head of the International Association of Dental and Medical Doctors

ONLINE: Web seen as vital link

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At Chicago's Water Tower Dental Care, patients can receive a modern version of the dental postcard: an e-mail or text message that reminds them of Wednesday's 2 p.m. appointment. Meanwhile, some of the more innovative doctors are blogging, creating educational podcasts and videos, holding virtual plastic surgery consultations and using Garageband to record patient-education sound files.

On the extreme end of the spectrum, doctors such as Jay Parkinson of New York have eliminated their offices. Parkinson, who bills himself as a "new kind of physician," only makes house calls and is accessible 24/7 via phone, e-mail, instant message, text messaging or video chat.

"Patients want to know how their doctor thinks," said Westby Fisher, director of cardiac electrophysiology at Evanston Northwestern Healthcare. Fisher sees his blog, Dr. Wes (drwes.blogspot.com), as both a creative outlet and a way to connect with patients.

"Does he think outside the box? Embrace technology or avoid it? Can he stand up against respectful criticism? There are a lot of issues that go beyond what we could ever find in a quality survey." While Fisher admits it can be scary to expose your thoughts to the public, "it's this type of transparency that improves a patient's understanding of what matters to their doctor, the limitations inherent to the medical profession, and it lets them see their doctor's more human

Medical blogs worth checking out

Cardiologist Westby Fisher loves to write about medical topics on his blog Dr. Wes (drwes.blogspot.com), but the real gems are his personal musings on life.

In just the last few weeks, Fisher has eloquently argued that medical errors are good for you. He has posted a quote about thankfulness that has been hanging on his refrigerator. And he has reflected on the guilt he felt after neglecting to offer an elderly patient a wheelchair because he was rushing home to his own family.

When Fisher's father recently died, he wrote about how doctors cope with losing a family member. And visitors to his blog can see his charity work, his hobbies, favorite movies and musicians, his rants against regulatory issues that impede health care.

Though hospitals are wary of the transparency blogs can provide, Fisher said he enjoys the interaction with patients and readers.

"There are a lot of smart people out there; I learn a lot," he said. But, he added: "You have to be careful. Certainly as I've done this more and more, I've developed a newfound respect for how quickly things move and are widely distributed."

Fisher, director of cardiac

ject lines that read "YOUR HIV TEST IS POSITIVE," argue that privacy issues get in the way. And some worry that the technology will replace good old-fashioned face-to-face communication.

But today's patients, who resent waiting hours for appointments, say they never get much face time with their double-booked doctors anyway. And



Tribune photo by Nancy Stone

Dr. Westby Fisher's blog covers both professional and personal territory.

electrophysiology at Evanston Northwestern Healthcare, is now one of five physicians who blog for medpagetoday.com.

Here are a few of his favorite doctor blogs:

■ kevinmd.com/blog: "An internist's perspective on the daily news in medicine—a must-have to stay abreast of the latest medical news."

■ gruntdoc.com: "A for-

mer Marine ER physician who tells it like it is from the front line [of ER medicine]."

■ casesblog.blogspot.com: "Cool medical cases and help for doctors-to-be."

■ www.surgeonsblog.blogspot.com: "A retired surgeon with an exceptional knack for storytelling."

■ theblogthatatemanhattan.blogspot.com: "A witty

blog that combines an ob-gyn's love for food with her love for medicine."

■ drdeborahserani.blogspot.com: "A psychologist who makes psychology interesting."

■ allbleedingstops.blogspot.com: "An outspoken, extremely liberal physician blogger in Seattle."

—Julie Deardorff

ON THE RADIO



Kathy and Judy want to know if you e-mail your doctor. Tune in to WGN-AM 720 between 9 a.m. and noon Monday.

it's, "Everyone else communicates with me by e-mail. Everyone else has a Web site that orients me. Why can't I walk in the door knowing the answers?"

A doctor's Web site primarily has two main functions: to help people find physicians or give them more information about their current doctor. After Lisa Menniger's son recently was treated by an ophthalmologist

iHealth system, which provides Web sites, electronic personal records and online communication services for doctors and health-care providers, has 70,000 doctors with Web sites, a 15 percent annual growth since 2000. In addition to e-mail and online consultation—two services that also are growing—Medem doctors can embed YouTube-hosted video on their Web sites to educate, explain treatment plans or procedures and introduce their practices to patients.

Video is a huge advantage from a marketing standpoint, "because no matter how bad you are on camera, it'll be better than a standard photo, and half the docs don't even have that," said Ed Fotsch, CEO of Medem, which was started by the American Medical Association and several national medical-specialty societies. "But it's less about [marketing] and more about being able to communicate with patients online. That's where the value is. And the demand."

The benefits aren't limited to the patients, however. Some digital doctors report increased efficiency and revenue; it also can free up staff from phone calls to give more personalized attention to patients standing in front of them.

For Thrash, who is on staff at Swedish Covenant Hospital, the Web site allows her to stay plugged in to her job while at home on maternity leave. It also means she can spend less time opining on what many of her clients really want to know about: skin-care products and cosmetic procedures.

"I love that part of my job, but I think it discredits me if the patients feel like they are being sold," she said. "With the online store, I can arm them with information and perhaps a sample or brochure. If they decide they want the product, they can go online and order it. If they don't, they don't. No pressure."