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 bit on Thrash, who recently had her second child. "If you’re scheduled for surgery, you can read pre- and post-op 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.

‘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

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 such things as check lab results and immunization records, request refills and appointments, and e-mail their physicians with non-urgent medical questions.

PLEASE SEE ONLINE, PAGE 10
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 about 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 his advice to others is 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 cardiology at Evanston Northwestern Healthcare, is now one of five physicians who blog for modpagetoday.com.

Here are a few of his favorite blogs:

- kevinmd.com/blog
- www.surgeonsblog.blogspot.com
- www.grundoc.com
- drdeborahtserani.blogspot.com
- alldiagnosis.com/blog

Fisher's blog covers both professional and personal territory.

Dr. Westby Fisher's blog combines an ob-gyn's love for food with her love for medicine.

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.

ONLINE:

Web seen as vital link

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

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, who bills himself as a "new kind of physician," only makes house calls and is accessible 24/7 via phone, e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging or video chat.

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

"Does blogging 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 blog," 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 doctors, the limitations inherent to the medical profession, and it lets them see

ject lines that read "YOUR HIV TEST IS POSITIVE," argue that people get their facts wrong. And some worry that the technology will replace good old-fashioned face-to-face communication.

But today's patients, who report waiting hours for appointments, say they never get much face time with their double