



CMA Online opens a (virtual) doctors' lounge

www.cma.ca/discussion_groups

The Internet has been called one of the most profound drivers of change affecting the culture of medicine.¹ It has also been cited as a provider of tremendous benefits for medical education, research and practice. But what about its dark side? Are patients becoming victims of an online psychopathology? Does the Internet improve or hamper the practice of medicine? And what about email? Does it enhance or hinder doctor-patient communication? Where can physicians discuss these and other ideas before they're published in journals? *CMA Online* thinks it will provide an answer with its Discussion Forums.

Opportunities for using the Net to enhance two-way communication within medical organizations are exploding. We've already seen indications of this at the CMA because of a growing number of visits to our Web site (www.cma.ca), where "page views" have surpassed 300 000 per month — roughly 10 times the level in 1996. Another sign is the surging popularity of *Clinical Q&A*, a discussion group operated by *CMA Online*. One recent weekend saw more than 30 postings by physicians, and the topics discussed ranged from painful injection sites and issues of confidentiality to the use of Ritalin and hormone replacement therapy.

We are going to witness more and more examples like this. As physicians get connected and start to use the Internet for more than email, there is a chance to develop virtual communities of physicians interested in specific health and medical issues. It's also an ideal way to pass on tidbits of information about what's bugging you and what's getting you excited in medicine or medical politics. (An al-

phabetical listing of international medical discussion groups is found at kernighan.imc.akh-wien.ac.at/stz/plattner/a.htm. A list of physician-specific discussion groups is found at www.med-edu.com/hn/physician_forum-TOC.html.)

No matter where a physician lives, the organizations that serve them can seem remote and isolated from doctors' day-to-day concerns. Twenty-five years ago we'd meet and discuss issues of interest in the doctors' lounge or at a dinner meeting. We lead busier lives today as we try to juggle the needs of patients with the demands of trying to keep current in a rapidly changing profession. At the same time, we're trying to save some time for family and friends. Meetings are hard to make or take, and getting to the doctors' lounge . . . well, with hospital closures and fewer physicians holding hospital privileges, there is less chance we'll run into colleagues there.

CMA Online thinks it can provide a forum for physicians to communicate among themselves. Think of it as a "virtual" doctors lounge, a place to kick back and wax poetic on topics in clinical medicine, global health or practice management. Or start your own discussion "thread" in the open forum and see if others want to join in. Sign-

ing on is easy — visit www.cma.ca/discussion_groups to find out how.

Bulletin boards like these new online forums allow users to post and respond to messages from other physicians, creating new links between colleagues around the country and, perhaps, around the world.

Whether it's a pet peeve about bioengineered potatoes or an opinion about the spelling of fetus, discussion forums are the perfect milieu to "be more or less specific."²

The transition from a guild age to an industrial age to an information age in medicine is happening at warp speed.³ These new CMA forums — they are password protected to provide member-only access — offer all members a chance to share their views. May a thousand ideas bloom.

[For more information about the online-forums initiative contact Dawna Feeley, feelda@cma.ca.] — *Dr. Peter Vaughan*, director of professional affairs, CMA

References

1. Pallen MJ. Medicine and the Internet: dreams, nightmares and reality. *Hosp Med* 1996;56(10):506-9.
2. Safire W. Up the down ladder. *New York Times Magazine* 1998;Nov.15:36.
3. Statement of the Assembly on the Future of Health Care. Scott and White Clinic, Temple, Texas, February 1997.



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DISCUSSION FORUMS

Looking for someone to talk with? In the Discussion Forums, you can seek an opinion, share an insight or wax poetic with fellow members of the CMA. Add your voice to discussions in the broad areas of clinical medicine, global health and practice management, join any conversation in the open forum, or start a "thread" of your own. This is your space on the Web, your virtual doctors' lounge, to use whenever you wish.

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