

Have health card, will travel

Patients in the European Union (EU) will have the right to seek free medical care in any of the EU's 15 member countries under a new agreement. The plan, expected to take effect in 2004, will benefit patients who face long waits for care in their own countries. The move comes after the European Court of Justice ruled that patients in the EU could go abroad for treatment if their own country is unable to provide care "within a time limit which is medically justifiable." Patients will have to obtain authorization from their own national health service, and details of the plan — such as whether patients will pay for treatment and then be reimbursed — are still being discussed.

One provision calls for an electronic insurance card that guarantees hospitals and doctors that treatment costs will be covered. EU countries already provide travellers with a form to complete in order to receive subsidized care while abroad. The plan is part of an effort to let citizens move about the EU with less paperwork and red tape.

About 1100 Britons go abroad each year for medical treatment paid for by the National Health Service, which critics say has been slow to reduce waiting times and to help patients find alternative treatment abroad. Yvonne Watts is suing her local NHS primary care trust for delaying her right to a hip replacement operation in

France. Watts, 72, has been told she may have to wait up to a year for the surgery.

Her family contacted a hospital in Lille, where at least 200 British patients received treatment last year, and were told the operation could be performed immediately. However, NHS officials have refused to authorize it, arguing that the NHS still reserves the right to define an "undue delay" under the EU plan.

"The UK definition, which we have checked with the Department of Health, is a delay beyond the maximum waiting time laid down in the NHS plan," a spokeswoman said. "For this lady, at this time, that would be 12 months." — *Mary Helen Spooner, West Sussex, UK*

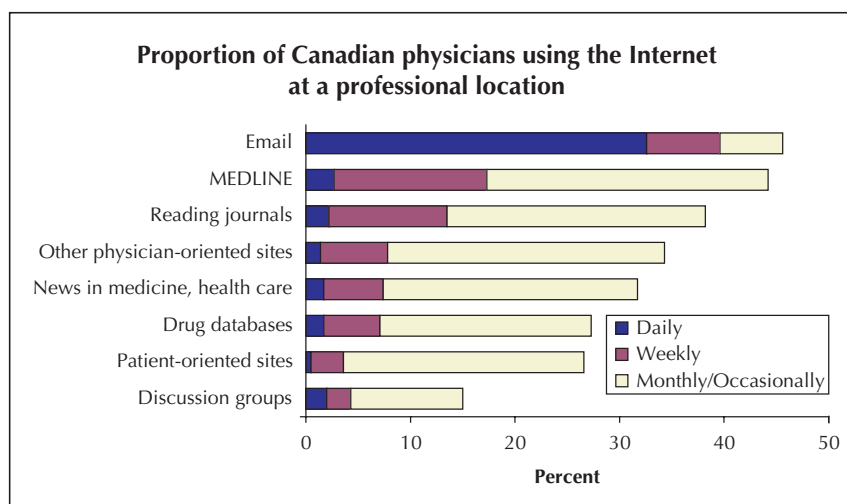
PULSE

MDs' office Internet use hits 57%

Although most (89%) Canadian physicians use the Internet, only 57% currently have access to it at their office or clinical practice, data from the CMA's 2002 Physician Resource Questionnaire (PRQ) indicate. Younger physicians are more likely to be wired in at work, with 62% of those under age 35 and 61% of those aged 35 to 44 reporting that they have access at a professional location. This declines to 55% for those aged 55 to 64 and to 42% in the 65-and-older group. Medical specialists are much more likely (72%) to have access at work than GP/FPs (48%) and surgical specialists (56%).

Overall, 53% of Canadian physicians use the Internet at work for at least one purpose. One-third of physicians now use email daily as part of their practice, and 46% use it at least occasionally. Daily email use at the office or professional location is more prevalent among medical specialists (47%) than surgical specialists (36%) or GP/FPs (22%).

MEDLINE searches are the next most popular Internet application at physicians' offices, although usage



tends to occur more irregularly — only 3% of physicians reported searching MEDLINE from work every day. Just over one-quarter (27%) of Canadian physicians visit online drug databases at least occasionally from their workplace, and 32% read online news in medicine and health care. Thirty-eight percent browse or read online journals at work, 38% visit other physician-oriented Web sites, and 27% view patient-oriented Web resources.

The PRQ is Canada's largest annual survey of physicians' professional activities. The 2002 PRQ was mailed to a random sample of 7693 doctors, and the response rate was 38%. Results at the national level are considered accurate to $\pm 1.9\%$, 19 times out of 20. Tables are available at www.ecmaj.com/cgi/content/full/167/5/521/DC1. — *Shelley Martin, Senior Analyst, Research, Policy and Planning Directorate, CMA*