

# The Importance of the Internet to Your Practice

OVER HALF YOUR PATIENTS ARE ONLINE ... ARE YOU?

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While no definitive figures have been released, the number of acupuncture and Oriental medicine practitioners who have access to the Internet is believed to be far less than their medical or chiropractic counterparts. While that situation may not affect the number of patients you see or the type of care you deliver, in the next few years, the Internet will become as much a part of your practice as any needle or herbal remedy you currently use.

Why is the Internet so important to your practice, and what role will it play in the future of acupuncture and Oriental medicine? Two important surveys released this past summer may provide answers to those questions.

The first survey, published by VHA and LaurusHealth, a national network of health care organizations and physicians, polled 1,000 adults and asked them about communicating with health care providers online. More than a third of those surveyed said that if given the choice, they would be "more likely" to choose a doctor who offered electronic communications than one who did not. The survey also found that while relatively few people currently exchange e-mail with their physician, 90% of those who do find the experience "valuable and convenient."

"Consumers in this survey make it clear how important it is to them to be able to communicate electronically with their doctors," said Dr. Peter J. Plantes, LaurusHealth's medical director. "This survey should challenge physicians to consider adding new technologies such as e-mail to strengthen relationships with their patients."

In addition to asking about patient/doctor communication, the VHA survey also asked what kind of electronic options patients would want. Among the most important options:

- 49% would like the ability to schedule appointments online;
- 46% would like to be able to send e-mail messages to their doctor;
- 37% want online access to their test results;
- 28% want online access to their patient records.

"It is fair to say that today, e-mail communication is increasingly viewed by patients as an added convenience," added Dr. Plantes. "Offering the convenience of online services that consumers are looking for could be a great way for physicians to build and maintain patient loyalty."

The second survey, conducted by Harris Interactive, showed just how much of an impact the Internet is having in terms of gathering and sharing information. According to the poll, the number of "cyberchondriacs" -- people who use the World Wide Web to search for information about health, medical care or particular diseases -- has skyrocketed in the past two years, from 54 million in June 1998 to approximately 98 million as of June 2000.

Of the 1,001 adults who took the Harris poll, 53% of respondents said they look "often" or "sometimes" for health information. The poll also estimated that of the 114 million adult Americans with Internet access, 86% had used the World Wide Web at least once to look for health information, a 15% increase from two years ago.

Taken together, the results of these two surveys show that the Internet is playing an increasingly important role in all aspects of health care. More people are gaining access to the Internet every day. More people are turning to the Net for health information. And while the numbers are relatively low now, patients are beginning to gauge the ability to communicate with their doctor electronically as an important factor in determining their choice of practitioner.

The Internet holds great promise, not just for individual acupuncturists and Oriental medicine doctors, but the entire profession. Used correctly, it can be a tremendous source of information, a method of inexpensive, instantaneous communication. With the proper format, doctors can share ideas, inform patients and potential patients of the benefits of acupuncture and Oriental medicine, and deliver news and other features in a timely, cost-efficient manner.

For years, the practice of acupuncture has been misunderstood and viewed with skepticism by much of the Western world. The Internet can help break through those barriers of misunderstanding and enhance people's knowledge of what acupuncture and Oriental medicine have to offer.

Remember: More than 100 million American adults already use the Net to search for health information. By establishing a presence online, people would learn the value acupuncture and Oriental medicine could have in establishing greater health for the nation, and they would have a greater appreciation of the services offered by your practice.

In the next few issues, we'll examine how the Internet can help unite the acupuncture profession. We'll also explore ways you can connect to the Internet, and how you can enhance your practice with a personal website.

I look forward to answering any questions or comments you may have.

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