

Using the Internet to improve the patient-physician consultation

MICHAEL O'LEARY

Mr. O'Leary has been managing editor for NexCura Inc. for five years. Previously, he was senior medical writer for the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.

"Your website afforded me and my mom critical information in a format which was not watered down, yet intelligible to the layperson. The links to the studies confirmed the surgeon's recommendation and sending the link to my brothers' families and mom's very-concerned niece, who is a nurse and who herself underwent a lumpectomy a few years ago, assuaged their fears and explained well why other available treatments were contraindicated for her. Armed with her experience and with the information we received from you, we were able to seek and receive answers to the most important questions regarding her treatment plan." (*User feedback sent to NexCura about the company's NexProfiler for breast cancer.*)

This quote represents the ideal outcome many physicians hoped for when the Internet first became widely used for health information searches. Patients can become better informed about specific conditions with reliable, accurate information that supports the information provided in the patient-physician discussion.

Approximately 110 million Americans go online each year to look for health care information, according to a 2002 Harris Interactive survey. Another survey reported approximately 6 million Americans seek medical advice online every day. Unfortunately, most of those searches fall short of the ideal, and result in frustrating patient-physician interactions caused by the need to sort through irrelevant or tangential information that detracts from a focused discussion of appropriate treatment options for patients.

The question is no longer how physicians should deal with information patients search for and read on the Internet. It is how to integrate the Web into their practices to enhance patient education, improve patient-physician discussions, and increase patient satisfaction. To that end, "information prescriptions" are beginning to take hold.

Dr. Peter Grimm, cofounder and medical director of the Seattle Prostate Institute, is one of the pioneers in brachytherapy for prostate cancer. He said physicians cannot afford to ignore the potential impact of the Internet—not only for improved patient education but, on a practice's bottom line. "We began tracking the influence of the Internet on our practice, and we know that 60% of the people who come to us are acting either directly on Internet information or considered Internet sources in choosing to come to us," he said.

Grimm's group of five specialists has performed more than 5,000 seed implant procedures and trained

more than 2,500 physicians, nurses, and physicists in the procedure. Grimm has become an advocate for the Internet to enhance his group's practice. Grimm said doctors have two choices when faced with patients toting printouts from the Web. "We can either try to ignore the material our patients bring us, or we can embrace it and work to improve it," he said.

Grimm chose to embrace it. For the past five years, he has worked with Seattle-based NexCura Inc. and dozens of other medical experts to develop online treatment decision support tools, called NexProfiler treatment options tools. After going through the NexProfiler for prostate cancer, Grimm contacted the company behind the technology. "I was enthusiastic about the idea of getting good information to patients. Patients need to know about their options and they need to be satisfied with the decisions they make," he said. "It is not easy to get into an explanation of a doctor's decision. You just cannot explain 15 or 20 years of experience with prostate cancer in 30 minutes, which is typically all the time you have to discuss information with a patient."

The evidence-based NexProfiler treatment options tools are among a growing number of personalized online tools for consumers who want to know more than general information about their conditions. These patients want reliable information relevant to their particular situations. The patented tools developed by NexCura cover 20 cancers, including bladder, breast, cervical, colorectal, kidney, lung, melanoma, ovarian, prostate, testicular, and uterine cancers. The company's tools can be found on websites of major patient advocacy organizations, such as the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, Y-me, Cancer Lifeline, and major academic institutional sites, including the Cleveland Clinic Foundation and Seattle Cancer Care Alliance.

To use them, a patient completes an in-depth questionnaire that covers diagnosis and general health information. The questions ask about stage, tumor grade, performance status, comorbidities, test results, and contraindicating conditions. Filling out the questionnaire, patients receive a thorough education covering their conditions via pop-up windows, interactive illustrations, and glossary support.

Once the questionnaire is complete, the NexProfiler technology matches the patient's clinical parameters against a medical database and returns the relevant treatment descriptions with discussions of side effects, complications, and questions to ask about each treatment. In addition, the tools offer outcomes reports and generate a list of clinical literature citations matched to the patient, based on the study's inclusion/exclusion criteria. For each study, patients receive an easy-to-read summary explaining the research objectives, materials, methods, results, and research conclusions.

All the information generated is scientifically validated, drawn from published medical literature, and reviewed by a medical editorial board of recognized experts and leaders in their respective specialties. As treatment progresses, patients can revisit the tool to update their clinical information, learn more about their evolving treatment options, and review newly published information they should consider.

Grimm, who co-edited *The Prostate Cancer Treatment Book*, said he uses the NexProfiler tools to support his patient education effort, and finds the information tends to verify the knowledge he provides his patients. "My job as a consultant is to narrow down the information patients receive and make it relevant to them," he said. "The NexProfilers help patients do this too. They get information and questions that are specific to them. The tools help verify the information we give our patients. Patients receive such a myriad of informa-

tion from the Internet. They can become overwhelmed, so it is nice to have a site that I know is reliable and provides specific information relevant to the patient."

In addition to full disclosure of treatment options, with discussions of side effects and complications, the tools also produce appropriate questions patients can print and take to their next office visit, which Grimm urges patients to do. "I encourage the use of written questions because all too often, if they aren't written down, it is too easy to forget them when talking to the doctor. Then often, those questions never get asked because the patient is embarrassed and doesn't feel comfortable going back to ask. The tools and questions generated from NexCura help patients use the time with the doctor well," Grimm said.

Overall, Grimm believes educated patients are good for their own care and for the physician's practice, which allows the team to better focus on the needs of all patients. "It really improves the quality of the time spent with patients," he said. "It helps patients use their appointment time efficiently. We get down to more detail with them. Patients who enter into the treatment process get better treatment. They understand their treatment options better; they understand the potential complications; and they understand their medications better. Because they ask more informed questions, their care team tends to tailor their treatment more carefully to them."

Or, as the patient's daughter concluded her message to NexCura:

"Consequently, everybody was on the same page, reasonably optimistic, and uncritical of her choice. She weathered the surgery with absolutely no negative consequences, and her progress has been remarkable. It cannot be overstated how important the information you provided was in making that life-critical decision and in helping her loved ones embrace it." ♦

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