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Assessing the Medical Correctness of Web Sites

(COLUMBUS, Ohio)— The Internet has become the first resource many people turn to for researching information; researching health topics is no exception.

One should take extra precautions to insure that the information they are retrieving through the Internet regarding their health is provided by a reliable source. Determining the accuracy of Web sites that offer medical advice should be viewed with a critical eye. These Web sites should not, under any circumstances, be used in place of advice from a licensed physician.

“Anyone who has email and uses the Internet frequently has likely encountered hoaxes, scams and misleading advertisements. Unfortunately, some medical sites can also be misleading and even dangerous,” said Dale Patterson, M.D., a Toledo-area family physician.

Patterson offers some questions to ask to determine the accuracy of a Web site offering health information.

- What is the source of the information?
- Does the site state who the author of the information is?
- Is the author of the information medically trained?
- Is the site sponsored by a company selling a product?
- Does the group sponsoring the site have a particular agenda or belief?

“Answering these questions will help sort out which sites can be trusted,” said Patterson. “Verifying the same information on multiple sites and with your doctor is also helpful.”

The best way to determine if information is correct is by searching sites that are maintained by well-known and trusted organizations. Web sites maintained by the Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.org), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov), The American Academy of Family Physicians (www.familydoctor.org) and The American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org) are examples of trusted sources. According to Patterson, many family physicians maintain Web sites for their practices that contain accurate and pertinent information for their patients. Patterson, like many physicians, subscribes to a Web site for medical professionals called UpToDate. An excellent source of information for physicians, there is now a free version for patients (www.patients.uptodate.com).

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Even after a Web site is determined to have accurate and updated information, it should only be used as a resource to learn about better health. Medical information on the Web can be a great resource to help one have a more educated conversation with their physician. Patterson also adds that trusted Web sites are a good place to review the information you have already discussed with your doctor, but never to make a self-diagnosis.

“Patients should be careful about trying to diagnose problems or changing treatment plans based on something they have read. They might be right, but they should check with their doctor before making any changes in their treatment,” said Patterson.

Patterson encourages his patients to use the Internet to research health topics and to learn about new ideas. For more personal advice regarding medications, test results or treatment, he recommends that all information should be discussed with a physician before any action is taken.

Reputable Web sites that offer accurate information are a positive source of available information which people can use to take a more active role in their healthcare and that of their families. Patients who have researched their own medical problems or health questions are often more informed for office visits. Patterson adds that more time can be spent dealing with a patient’s specific concerns after going over the basics quickly.

“The Internet is a great source of medical information and can be a tremendous help for patients. I highly recommend that patients use reputable sites to learn about their health and become active in their care,” said Patterson. “Patients should be careful to not be misled or confused by statements from less than trustworthy sources.”

The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians is a statewide professional association with more than 4,400 members, including practicing physicians, family medicine residents and medical students. The scope of family medicine encompasses all ages, both sexes and every disease entity. Family physicians provide comprehensive, continuing care to all members of the family.

FACT SHEET

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Ask these questions to help determine if a medical Web site is reputable:

- What is the source of the information?
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- Is the author of the information medically trained?
- Is the site sponsored by a company selling a product?
- Does the group sponsoring the site have a particular agenda or belief?

Reputable Web sites for medical information:

- American Academy of Family Physicians: www.familydoctor.org
- American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov
- UpToDate for patients: www.patients.uptodate.com
- MayoClinic: www.mayoclinic.com