



net diagnosis

Should we be worried that more people than ever before are going online to find health information?

BY DR. ART HISTER



Or perhaps, curiosity about why there are any Canadians left alive, given how some ads during this debate implied that under Medicare, Canadian doctors are rapidly killing everyone here in order to keep the health-care budget under control.

Rather, I believe the main reason for this spike in Internet users is that a rising number of people are going online to get information they're not getting elsewhere. This feeling was hammered home to me by

understanding of drug interactions and potential side effects;

- so they can find info on what patients with similar problems are doing;
- so they can discover what cutting-edge research is being done on a particular condition.

So using the Net to get information and advice is mostly a good thing, I think. And for me, people who do it are not "cyberchondriacs," the term used in this report in *HealthDay News*. Instead,

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my viewers, who, after I commented on this report on my TV segment (7:45 every morning on Global BC for anyone who doesn't know that yet), showered me with emails about why the Internet has been of benefit to them.

Some of the more obvious reasons they find the Internet helpful include:

- because most doctors don't know much about rare conditions;
- because many doctors don't have the time to deal with the myriad questions, difficulties and nuances that arise from chronic health conditions;
- so they can get a full

I'd say they are just wise health consumers.

One important caveat, however: the Internet doesn't supply perspective. It's hard to judge the objectivity and authoritativeness of many sites, and on many sites, all "facts" are seemingly of equal importance and validity — and that's where a health professional can offer invaluable service, especially in terms of diagnosis and treatment.

As can, of course, a good health columnist. Anyone know where you can find one? ■

A recent Harris Poll telephone survey of 1,066 American adults has determined that more Americans than ever have turned to the Internet to seek medical advice. And although neither they nor we like to admit it, Canadians really are very similar to our southern cousins in our needs and tastes.

The report gave a whole bunch of figures, but the one

that leapt out for me is the finding that 32 per cent of Americans claim they "often" search online for health information, a jump from just 22 per cent a year earlier.

The polling folks figure that the increase is mostly a reflection of the recent bitter American dispute about health-care reform, and I suppose that's probably a bit true. But I think there's much more to this finding than simply a curiosity about health-care reform.

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