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The Ethics of Physicians' Web Searches for Patients' Information *Nicholas Genes and Jacob Appel, The Journal of Clinical Ethics, 2015¹*

This article explores ethical issues related to online searches by physicians for personal information about patients. It explores arguments both for and against these web searches, concludes that, in some cases, online searches for personal information may be of benefit to patients, and advocates for the development of guidelines for appropriate use of the information.

Introduction

The authors describe how patients are accumulating increasing amounts of personal information online through social media, news sites and web databases. Health care, and thus, patient information, is now divided among various care providers who have increasingly less time with patients to seek patient information in-person. For these reasons, it is understandable for physicians to want to make use of this publicly available information to inform patient care.

Arguments Against Web Searches

The authors outline a number of arguments against physicians' web searches:

- Web searches may erode a physician's trust in a patient, affecting their relationship
- Even if the online information is publicly available, searching for it is a breach of privacy, as the patient likely did not intend for it to be considered in their health care treatment
- Though it may not be as efficient as searching online, seeking patient information during an in-person visit is better practice
- Factual inaccuracies are plentiful online, thus web searches could provide false information
- Many physician-patient relationships are most effective when their personal lives do not overlap; web searches may reveal unknown connections between them that may distract from patient care and/or create a conflict of interest
- Information found online that is irrelevant to treatment and otherwise would not be known might create bias toward a patient
- Web searches are not anonymous and leave an electronic footprint, leading to potential issues of privacy and confidentiality

¹ Genes N. & Appel, J. (2015). The ethics of physicians' web searches for patients' information. *The Journal of Clinical Ethics*, 26 (1), 68-72.

Arguments in Favour of Web Searches

- Web searches are useful in emergency situations when patients cannot provide their history or informed consent (and likely less intrusive than the traditional practice of checking belongings). Concerns about affecting the doctor-patient relationship are less relevant since these relationships are transient in emergency settings
- The majority of physicians believe that web searches for patient information are ethical and could have a positive impact on patient care
- Nobody has a reasonable expectation of privacy in publicly available online information. These searches are similar to seeking information from patients' friends and relatives, previous treating physicians and other traditional sources
- Internet searches may reveal data that increases benefit and decreases harm to a patient

Conclusion

Physicians are trained to evaluate and apply various sources of information appropriately for patient care; the authors argue that publicly available online information should be considered, along with traditional sources such as physical exam findings, test results and research. Given that patients are accumulating more data within electronic health records and externally through public websites and social media, the authors assert that distinguishing between the validity, utility, benefits and risks of accessing this data is increasingly counterproductive. Rather, we should be working toward the development of guidelines for the appropriate use of this information to benefit patient care.