

Health in-sites: Patients and providers make healthy use of the Web

By KIMBERLEE ROTH
Special to the Record-Eagle

Type "health" into a search engine such as Yahoo! and it brings back 13,450 category matches alone. Hundreds of thousands of health pages make their home in cyberspace and healthcare providers and their patients are using them in a variety of ways.

Glen Johnson, Ph.D., a clinical neuropsychologist and clinical director of the Neuro-Recovery Head Injury Program in Traverse City, has been treating head injured patients for 15 years. He launched a Web site two years ago, www.tbiguide.com, to make information more readily available to his patients and their families.

"Patient education is very important. Patients who are better educated simply do better."

Johnson had converted notes from his weekly lecture series into a "very simple, easy-to-read book," which he was copying in his office and distributing by mail to patients who requested it.

"It became hugely popular, but our copier was wearing out," said Johnson.

Since Johnson's decision to put the book on the Internet in 1998, he's had more than 66,000 visitors to his site from all over the world.

"I've gotten e-mail from Australia, the U.K. and Canada. I've lectured in British Columbia because people had read the book online."

On the site, Johnson asks for a small donation if readers find the book useful. The honor system seems to be working, he said.

"I don't make a lot of money, but it pays for the costs of the site. Whatever's left we put toward mailing and postage costs for those that don't have Internet access."

Johnson spends about 10 hours each week on-line, researching specific issues and disorders and keeping current on what's happening in medicine. He also uses the Web to communicate with current and former patients, as well as others who have

questions about traumatic head injuries. He receives about four or five e-mails each day, and often points people "in the right direction," such as to the Brain Injury Association, for help.

Johnson said that adding the cyber dimension to his practice "makes my job easier. I think patients are more realistic as to what to expect from treatment. Treatment is not passive; patients need to be actively involved. The Internet is the coming wave. People are researching their medical disorders, and they're better informed."

Laura McCain, a registered dietitian and outpatient nutritionist at Munson Medical Center and adjunct instructor at Northwestern Michigan College, has been on-line for over a year. She said she's "been using the Internet more and more all the time" to access healthy recipes and research topics in her field.

McCain said she was initially skeptical of the Internet.

"I thought, 'That's all I need is one more mailbox,' but it's been very helpful. It saves me time and keeps me up to date. I'm definitely more accessible to clients and it's easier to communicate back and forth."

She recently told a client about a fitness site where the client could buy exercise bands, but not having the Web site address with her, she e-mailed it to the client later on. Another client with diabetes e-mails her blood sugar readings to McCain regularly.

"It helps me to monitor her better. The biggest challenge is to get people to come back," said McCain. "If you can just e-mail, I can look over patterns and ask questions. That's a lot of what we do at a follow-up visit anyway."

McCain has seen an increase in the past six months in clients who are more Net-savvy.

"They're asking me about things I just read in last month's professional journals."

But not all clients are comfortable on-line, or

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