

Oh, to have Dr. Facebook on call!

Patients want to be able to contact doctors via email or Facebook

If it were up to Internet-savvy Americans, more of them would be emailing or sending Facebook messages to their doctors to chat about their health. That's the result of a national survey led by Joy Lee of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in the US. The findings¹ appear in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*², published by Springer.

Surveys were sent to more than 4,500 customers of a retail pharmacy. The replies of the 2,252 respondents were included in the analysis. Respondents tended to be well educated, in good health, and frequent users of Facebook.

The results show that the people who responded are very interested in using email and Facebook to communicate with their physicians, and to manage their health. In the six months prior to the survey, 37 percent of patients did, in fact, contact their doctors via email, and another 18 percent through Facebook. Lee says the latter finding is notable, as most institutions actively discourage social media contact with individual patients, due to privacy and liability concerns.

Non-white respondents, people younger than 45 years old and those with a higher income are more likely to make electronic contact with their doctors. It is also true for those taking care of others, and patients with chronic health conditions. College graduates are more likely than others to use Facebook to communicate with their physicians, while people with lower education levels and income do not opt for correspondence by email.

The survey also shows that up to 57 percent of patients want to use their physicians' websites to access health information. Around 46 percent of patients want to be able to use email to track their health progress and access health information.

Many of these functions are already possible through the electronic health records systems, developed and used by many major hospitals. However, the survey shows that despite expressing interest in such opportunities, few patients use them. Only seven percent of respondents actually use their physicians' websites to access their own health information, while another seven percent fill prescriptions via email. Lee says these results highlight a disconnect between patient interest and use. It suggests that patients might not be aware of existing services.

"The findings highlight the gap between patient interest for online communication and what physicians may currently provide," says Lee. "Improving and accelerating the adoption of secure web-messaging systems is a possible solution that addresses both institutional concerns and patient demand."

References:

1. Lee, J.L. *et al* (2015). Patient use of email, Facebook, and physicians' websites to communicate with physicians: A national online survey of retail pharmacy users. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. DOI 10.1007/s11606-015-3374-7
2. The *Journal of General Internal Medicine* is the official journal of the Society for General Internal Medicine.

The full-text article is available to journalists on request.

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