



Vol. III No. 2 Resident Assistance Program Newsletter July 2006

## When a patient's family needs to know (and they're 1000 miles away)

It happens frequently in Florida, and in any community with a high retiree population: Mom or Dad needs medical care, and there are difficult decisions to be made. Their adult children live in another state, yet they want to know what's going on with their parents' medical care. And, they will likely influence their parents' decisions. How do you communicate with them clearly in a way that protects privacy, provides essential information and makes the best use of your time?

Scheduling time for phone calls in the middle of your busy day can be difficult, especially when there are time zone differences. Patients and their distant families may want you to correspond by e-mail, but you may not be sure if that's a good idea.

Joseph E. Scherger, MD, MPH is a professor in the Department of Family and Preventive Medicine at the University of California, San Diego. His area of interest is online communication and how it should become a very frequent part of medical communication.

"Most residents have had some introduction to use of electronic health records, but they may not have had training in the use of electronic communications with patients," says Scherger. "Doctor-patient e-mail is a form of medical care, and learning to use it without violating privacy and confidentiality is essential to prepare residents for the realities of clinical practice."

"Communicating by telephone is often frustrating," says Scherger. "Yet doctors have resisted using e-mail, because they don't necessarily see the efficiency of it. They see it as an added time demand, but it can actually make their lives easier."

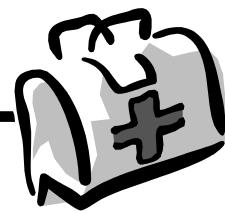
Doctors have been slow to adopt e-mail as a method of communicating, agrees Robert Brooks, M.D., associate dean for health affairs at Florida State University College of Medicine. In 2005, Brooks and Nir Menachemi, Ph.D., MPH, assistant professor and director, Center on Patient Safety at FSU College of Medicine conducted an extensive survey of Florida primary care doctors and

*Developing good communication skills is essential for your success as a physician. When you face challenges related to effective communication, conflict, finances or other stresses during your residency, RAP professionals can help. We offer counseling, coaching and an extra measure of support when you need it most. Let us know what barriers we can help you overcome to make you a more successful physician. Call us at 813-870-3344.*

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surveys in all were sent, so it was by far the largest survey of physicians in one geographic area," says Brooks. "Many of the questions asked about use of communications tools, including electronic health records, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and e-mail. What was most surprising was that only 16.6 percent of the survey respondents had used e-mail, and less than 3 percent use it

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**Electric communication will never be a substitute for the face of someone who with their soul encourages another person to be brave and true.**

*Charles Dickens  
(1812-1870)*



## Money Matters

### Great Resources for Busy Docs

How's your financial literacy? You may realize you've been focused on the field of medicine so long that you haven't picked up the basics you will need to plan a healthy financial future. Here are a few resources you can use to get up to speed.

If you have a portable media player like an iPod, you can listen to "Your Money" in the form of free podcasts offered by the Securities and Exchange Commission. Available for download in the Investor section at [www.sec.gov](http://www.sec.gov), the podcasts cover such topics as reading financial disclosures, evaluating investment opportunities and asset allocation.

The North American Securities Administrators Association Web site [www.nasaa.org](http://www.nasaa.org), offers free investor education tools including an investor awareness quiz, investor alerts and tips and other financial education resources. NASAA also has a free brochure, "Cutting Through the Confusion," designed to guide investors through the process of choosing an investment services provider.

MyMoney.gov is the U.S. government's Web site dedicated to the basics of financial education. It offers information from 20 federal agencies on budgeting and taxes, credit, home ownership, paying for education, investment scams, saving and investing, and retirement planning. The site also offers a free My Money Tool Kit.

While online resources can help you get the basics, there's no substitute for having a local financial adviser you can talk to help you achieve your unique financial goals.

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## Communicating across the miles, *continued*

regularly, which we defined as at least three times a week."

"The general public (in studies done by other investigators) uses e-mail far more frequently than the doctors we surveyed," says Brooks. "So I think the demand is there, and it's growing rapidly — patients want to be able to communicate with physicians about health care."

One of the most remarkable and important findings of the survey, Brooks says, is that of the doctors who do use e-mail, how few have adopted nationally published guidelines for their office e-mail usage. "The American Medical Informatics Association ([www.amia.org](http://www.amia.org)) published guidelines in 1998, and in 2000 the AMA developed similar guidelines," Brooks explains. "But few physicians know about or use the guidelines, in spite of the fact that adopting the guidelines might help them decrease the risk of using e-mail communications."

Scherger says he has found e-mail an effective way to communicate with patients' families who are not able to be there in person. "The relationship should be established, either in person or by phone first," he recommends. "Then, it can be a very appropriate way of setting up subsequent phone calls or visits, or for sharing things like test results."

"E-mail does have a role to play with distant family members once a relationship is established and questions are straightforward," Brooks adds. "But when the situation is complex, or there is an abnormality that needs to be explained, it is much easier to communicate by phone than to play e-mail tag."

### **E-Mail Guidelines for Doctors**

Among the e-mail communication guidelines for doctors included in a white paper by the American Medical Informatics Association are these:

- Establish types of transactions (prescription refill, appointment scheduling, etc.) and sensitivity of subject matter (HIV, mental health, etc.) permitted over e-mail.
- Print all messages, with replies and confirmation of receipt, and place in patient's paper chart.
- Establish turnaround time for messages. Do not use e-mail for urgent matters.
- Inform patients about privacy issues. (Who besides addressee processes messages? Do patients understand that their message will be included as part of their medical record?)
- Instruct patients to put category of transaction in subject line of message for filtering: "prescription," "appointment," "medical advice," "billing question."

Find the complete "Guidelines for the Clinical Use of Electronic Mail with Patients" at <http://www.amia.org/mbrcenter/pubs/>