



**CONFIDENTIAL**

*Worry can be a problem for doctors, too. For immediate help with problems or worries that interfere with your ability to function at work or at home, your first resource is the Resident Assistance Program Hotline (RAP), 813-870-3344.*

Vol. I No. 24 Resident Assistance Program Newsletter September 2003

## How to Identify and Manage the “Worried Well” Patient

When health news hits the airwaves, the daily paper or the Internet, your patients are paying attention. This can be both a blessing and a curse.

The doctor’s role as a main source of health information has never had more competition. Sometimes the health issues patients hear about from other sources can be a great way to begin a patient-physician discussion. But the flip side is that some patients worry unnecessarily about the latest disease outbreak, new drug discoveries, experimental treatments and other headline health news, disrupting their doctors’ already overburdened schedules.

### Tips for Residents

“Residents are going to see ‘worried well’ patients a lot,” says Daniel Van Durme, M.D., a Tampa family physician and associate professor in the Department of Family Medicine at the University of South Florida. “Patients or their family

members will pick up information from the paper or the Internet and bring it up during their appointment. Unless someone has a genuine underlying anxiety disorder, depression or other mental health problem, it’s unlikely that a disease they read or hear about in the news will bring them in as the sole reason for their visit. But it’s common for those types of concerns to be added to the other reasons for their visit. And we end up spending more time and energy in explaining the ‘disease du jour’ than with a true medical problem.”

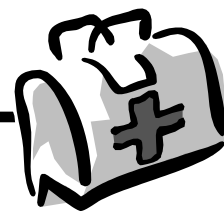
It’s important to learn from the patient where the concerns are coming from, says Van Durme. “It may be your cue to open up a dialogue. Ask ‘why is this a concern to you?’ It may be a simple lack of understanding about their health status that can be solved with additional patient education. Or, you may discover concerns about the cost of their drugs, they may be experiencing side effects, or they have doubts about their treatment plan and are trying to pursue another. That question

should help pinpoint the source of worry and help you explore other options together.”

“Being prepared is the best defense,” offers Van Durme. “When I was in med school and during my residency, I waited until the end of the day to read the paper. Now, I scan the paper for medical news stories *before* I come to work. That helps me anticipate what patients may be bringing up in the course of the day.”

### When “Cyberchondria” is the

*Continued on next page*



**Worry gives a small thing a big shadow.**

*-Swedish Proverb*

**“I told you I was sick!”**

*-Inscription on the tombstone of a hypochondriac*

What topics would you like to see ?  
Contact the editor by e-mail:  
patricianalexander@earthlink.net



## Money Matters

### Your Disability Coverage is Designed to Minimize Worry

Even though the topic of disability insurance is covered during orientation, some residents have questions about what coverage is provided through the College of Medicine. Here are a few highlights you may have missed.

- You are provided with \$2,000 per month of disability income protection while you are in the USF House Staff Training program.

- The coverage is underwritten by UNUM Provident, the world leader in disability income insurance.

- If you are a resident/fellow unable to work as a result of an accident or illness, you may, with approval, utilize the sick leave (up to 90 days of the Sick Leave Pool) and the short term disability policy (an additional 90 days).

- A long term disability insurance policy would then provide compensation of \$2,000 per month up to age 65 in the event you are unable to practice medicine.

- While you are in the training program, you have the ability to purchase, at your own expense, an additional \$1,500 per month of coverage at a permanent 35% discount.

For more details on your current disability coverage, or if you would like to learn how to obtain more, please call *Julio Muniz* or *Kim Fults* at **Muniz and Associates**, 813-258-0033.

www.munizandassociates.com

## Dealing with the “Worried Well”

### Problem

The phenomenon of “cyberchondria” was identified by journalist Lois Rogers in the Sunday Times - London (“The Internet Addicts Who Give Their GP a Headache,” April 2, 2000). The term is defined as “the deluded belief you suffer from all the diseases featured on the Internet.” It’s a growing contributor toward physician work overloads.

“We see the problem often, especially in patients with complex conditions or chronic conditions,” says Alan Brookstone, M.D., a family physician in Richmond, British Columbia. “When patients bring in reams of information, we end up having to debrief the patient. It becomes very time consuming, and it’s difficult to stay one step ahead.”

“While some of the information gathered online may be a useful starting point for dialogue, much of it is unrelated to the patient’s problem,” says Ottawa-based practice management consultant and office efficiency consultant Don Price. “Even worse is that the information may be wholly inaccurate causing patients to worry unnecessarily about illnesses they do not have.”

The best way to handle “cyberchondriacs,” says Price, is to

-acknowledge their concerns

-suggest some reputable, peer-reviewed health Web sites

-offer to set up a subsequent appointment to address specific concerns

### Taking Care Not to Dismiss Real Concerns

“The other thing to keep in mind,” Van Durme adds, “is that even if a patient appears to be a hypochondriac, hypochondriacs get real disease that needs to be addressed.” When any patient presents concerns, no matter what their source, it’s up to doctors not to dismiss them, but to listen and then use the opportunity to educate the patient.

### Reliable Resources Online

*The Internet has made it more challenging for doctors to keep up with what their patients may have concerns about, because patients can find virtually anything they want online. Here are sites medical professionals recommend for reliable information.*

**www.healthfinder.gov** An award-winning Federal Web site, developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services together with other Federal agencies. Spanish language version also provided.

**www.familydoctor.org** From the American Academy of Family Physicians. Health topics include drug information, children’s health, self-care and a medical dictionary. Also offers Spanish version.

**www.uptodate.com** A peer-reviewed, subscription site is specifically designed to answer the clinical questions that arise in daily practice.

**www.mdconsult.com** Subscription site with peer-reviewed resources from more than 50 publishers, medical societies, and government agencies. Also provides journal abstracts, medical news and drug updates.

**www.emedicine.com** Offers educational information for patients on more than over 500 medical topics, peer-reviewed articles, news, info on recalls and alerts.