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Following doctor's orders

The Leader-Post

Published: Saturday, January 24, 2009

Editorial

The Internet can be a source of useful health information if the site is reputable and endorsed by experts. However, online surfing should never be a substitute for the opinion of a doctor or other medical professional.

A little knowledge can be dangerous. But it can also be a good thing.

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The difference is what people do with information they gather on human health.

The plethora of health-care

related sites on the world-wide web draw more and more readers every year. But they are of wildly varying accuracy, and doctors and other health-care workers say problems can arise if well-meaning people misinterpret

information and begin finding diseases where none exist -- and then either refuse to see their physicians or argue endlessly with doctors and nurses when the latter cannot verify patients' "self-diagnosis".

This phenomena first arose when newspapers and magazines began printing health-related articles, and then again when the first "medical dramas" like Ben Casey and Dr. Kildare, aired on TV in the early 1960s.

Now, people are surfing the 'net for medical information.

They should start by finding a reliable source of information, as opposed to a blog or website that might be run by somebody with no medical training whatsoever. (It is passing strange that free or low-cost screening programs do not have widespread patronage by potential clients, yet many people routinely haunt websites of dubious value.)

Instead, people should pick the websites of organizations with strong credibility, like the Mayo Clinic, Harvard Medical School, government health ministries or a respected organization like the Canadian Cancer Society.

Rather than using bits of information as the basis for self-diagnosis, use it to "make a list of questions and then take them to your doctor," said Andrew Caswell, a spokesman for the Saskatchewan division of the Canadian Cancer Society -- the website of which, incidentally, bears **the logo of the Health on the Net (HON)** Foundation, which inspects medical or health websites for the accuracy of their information, then lets them use this "stamp" of approval.

Caring, conscientious, medical professionals must be a little annoyed at people's willingness to trust Internet sources over caregivers, but that's one of the quirks of human nature. The best we can all do is remember that while the Internet, books and TV shows can give us a little information, they don't qualify us to

perform sophisticated medical diagnoses on ourselves or other people.

Enlighten yourself with a little knowledge, but keep it in perspective -- then consult with the medical professionals.

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