Capsule Commentary on Lee et al., Patient use of Email, Facebook, and Physicians' Websites to Communicate with Physicians: A National Online Survey of Retail Pharmacy Users

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This study by Lee and colleagues¹ presents survey data on patients' use and interest in Internet communication with their physician. Patients with a chronic health condition or their families who were part of a national retail pharmacy database were queried, and a surprisingly high number reported contacting their physician via email (37 %) and Facebook (18 %); fewer reporting using an online website or portal to access the health information of themselves or a family member (4–8 %). Patients were most interested, however, in using a physician's website (57 %) to access their health information and request prescription refills.

Lee's study points out that, as of 2013, patients are increasingly interested in the ease of web-enabled communication with their physician for the purposes of tracking their health information and requesting prescriptions. Stage 2 of CMS's Meaningful Use program requires that patients have the ability to communicate with their provider. As the percentage of physicians meeting these criteria increases, patients will increasingly have this option. As of 2013, 49 % of physicians had the capability to send messages securely to patients from their electronic health record.²

Limitations of this study are notable for the population surveyed—retail pharmacy customers who volunteered to participate in research to obtain coupons for future purchases. Future research should evaluate different patient populations to determine if these trends hold.

A question not addressed by this study is whether unencrypted email and social media are appropriate for patient–physician communication. HIPAA does not prohibit use

of email between physicians and patients,³ however it is generally advised that secure web portals should be used due to the added security they provide. As Lee's study points out, this is the method of communication most preferred by patients, too.

As the US embraces more patient-centered, value-based care, patients will demand ubiquitous and unfettered access to their health information, including physicians' progress notes. Early studies have shown promise in improving patient satisfaction and measures of patient engagement in their care.⁴ Lee's study suggests that savvy physicians will engage with their patients to find easy and secure electronic methods to meet this emerging demand.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflict with any of the material in this manuscript.

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