



## Surfing the Oncology Net

Lee E. Mortenson

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## FROM THE EDITOR



## Surfing the Oncology Net

by Lee E. Mortenson, D.P.A.

**M**y fifteen-year-old son was sitting by my side, leaning over and staring at the computer screen as I clicked along. "The Web is a great equalizer, Dad," he told me. "It doesn't matter whether you are a big organization or a small one. Now you can be on the Web and be available to everyone!"

Still it was a surprise to me to see ACCC's patient advocacy brochure, "Cancer Treatments Your Insurance Should Cover," touted on the Web as a "new" feature of a medical school site. Seeing it gave me a little hint of what those old USSR guys must have felt when they saw people from their tightly controlled country with fax machines, PCs, and then the Web. Whoops, game over!

As ACCC begins to think about its forthcoming Web site, I have talked to other members of the health care industry about what they will and will not make accessible on the Web. The larger the corporation, the more concern there is about the Web. Who can access it? What corporate secrets will be put out on the Web? What are the liability issues? Yet with a few quick key strokes, your patients, their families, your staff, your spouse, and your kids can link to the Web and to information resources that just last year were only obtainable by your medical librarian.

When I look under "cancer" on the Web, I find more than 2,000 references, although many sites are rarely visited. I find information and misinformation, just as I would expect to find in any literature search. Of course, the Web has

such powerful potential to reach so many people that it is easy to be overwhelmed with its potential to help or to harm. If you can't tell the good guys from the bad, then there is always a problem. Yet increasing the availability of information is something that the cancer care community must strongly support.

As in other areas, such as protocol research, guideline development, and community involvement in research activities, oncology has had a great deal of experience with providing information to patients and professionals, far in advance of many other subspecialty areas. The National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service offices have been with us for more than two decades and have done no harm to the organizations that have sponsored them or to competitive organizations.

Indeed, cancer patients and their families seem to have an unquenchable thirst for information, and the World Wide Web may be one of many sources where they—or their computer-sophisticated kids—can get it. The same is true for many of us, with growing needs for information to assist us in determining how to manage our cancer organizations more effectively and efficiently.

Our responsibility, as always, is to develop solid, useful tools that will provide members of the Association, other members of the medical community interested in cancer, and patients and their families with appropriate access to community cancer resources.

It can be exciting. It can be scary. I suspect it will be both. Check for us on the Web. Surf's up. ■