



# Oncology and the Internet

## Developing an Oncology Practice Web Site

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# Oncology and the Internet

## Developing an Oncology Practice Web Site

by Ajay K. Dubey, M.D., M.P.H.

**T**he Internet has empowered cancer patients to arm themselves with important health information. Patients can use that information to make the best treatment choices and understand how to deal with their illness. Patients can research vast amounts of medical information right from their homes, with relative privacy and discretion. While on-line, patients can find information about their physicians, learn about the latest treatments and protocols, and even download directions to their medical appointments.

The expanding use of the Internet by patients and their families has generated growing interest in oncology practices to "go on-line." Increasingly, the Internet is accepted as another medium in the medical marketplace, much in the same way that print and television are viewed. The development of oncology practice web sites is no longer a novelty, and indeed can be considered as much a part of the business aspect of a practice as business cards or advertisements in the local telephone directory.

### NAVIGATING THE LINKS

Developing a web site for your oncology practice has some key advantages. The first is visibility on the "information superhighway." Regular print advertisements or flyers now seem incomplete without a "dot com" address on the bottom. Practices can display their locations, services, and physician biographical

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profiles, in addition to providing links for patients who seek more information. A number of oncology web sites even accept non-emergent referral inquiries on-line.

An important point to remember is that providing patient information does not necessarily mean generating disease information *de novo*; rather, patients often find links to cancer information sites as useful as the information itself. By providing links to the web sites of such organizations as the American Cancer Society or Cancer Care, Inc., oncology practices can provide a useful service to their

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patients. Better yet, the practice need not be burdened with generating volumes of data on each disease site (although some physicians do publish their writings and works on-line for their patients).

### THE ONLINE BUSINESS OF HEALTH CARE

The next frontier of oncology practice web sites is to actually conduct health care business on-line. While many people already purchase books, music, and computers on the Internet, others express concern about giving out confidential health

information. As security issues are addressed, it is conceivable that routine patient data registration or insurance forms will one day be submitted on-line. Currently there are a host of projects active in examining e-mail correspondence between medical practices and patients, ranging from automated responses (what to do when a given symptom appears) to patient-specific advice. It is clear that before such applications become widespread, legal and patient confidentiality issues must be addressed.

My own experience in developing a basic site for our practice ([www.tarrantoncology.com](http://www.tarrantoncology.com)) and in speaking with webmasters of health information sites has taught me that patients are most interested in disease-specific information, as well as information on health care professionals and facilities. Other areas of great patient interest include specific treatment options, as well as available research trials and protocols.

Options for developing web sites range from using software such as Microsoft FrontPage® to hiring a professional web design firm. Regardless of which option is chosen, it is important to note that a large percentage of patients may be first-time Internet users. Therefore, sites that are easy to use and generous with content are likely to be more popular with patients than slow sites with flashy graphics and hard-to-find information.

Developing an oncology practice web site that is easy to navigate and contains information about the services offered is clearly smart business practice. Furthermore, by adding disease information and/or links, such a site can be a valuable service to patients and can help empower them to be active participants in their own health care. ■