

Patients Aren't Flooding Physicians' E-Mail Boxes

BY SHERRY BOSCHERT
San Francisco Bureau

SAN FRANCISCO — Not many patients are e-mailing their physicians, and of those who do, the majority click "send" less than once a month, an online survey of 1,881 people suggests.

Fewer than 17% of respondents reported recently e-mailing their physicians, Dr. Thomas K. Houston said at the triennial congress of the International Medical Informatics Association.

The survey recruited respondents mainly from the Aetna IntelliHealth Web site (www.intelihealth.com); some were recruited from patient e-mail portals operated by Harvard Medical School, Boston.

In-depth phone interviews with 56 of the 311 respondents who had e-mailed their physicians revealed that 30 did so less than once a month, 12 e-mailed about once per month, and 14 e-mailed their physicians more frequently, said Dr. Houston of the University of Alabama, Birmingham.

"Certainly, one of the concerns that physicians have had is being overwhelmed by e-mail" if they offer that option to patients, he said. These results suggest that

this is not a problem, but that conclusion could change if more patients begin e-mailing, he added.

E-mail messages were mostly requests for prescription renewals or lab results, but some patients tried to use e-mail to communicate urgent problems such as chest pains. "That is a big concern," and suggests the need for patient education about e-mail use, he said.

Half the e-mail messages went to general internists, about 25% went to sub-

specialty internists, and the rest went to family physicians, ob.gyns., surgeons, pediatricians, and other specialists.

These "early adopters" of e-mail communication with physicians liked the efficiency of e-mail and the ability to communicate without a face-to-face appointment, Dr. Houston said. On the other hand, they sometimes worried that they would not get a reply, and they were concerned about bugging their physicians with too many e-mails. ■

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