BY PETER J. ZIEMKOWSKI, M.D.

THE OFFICE

Putting the Web to Use in Practice

I am a strong believer in using the resources we have so readily at hand to inform ourselves of the latest medical information and guidelines and to inform our patients. Every exam room in our practice is wired with access to the Web and I refer to it during nearly every patient visit. Here's a quick look at sites that I'm currently using:

► **Social Bookmarking:** With the explosion of social networking sites in the past year, there has been a corresponding increase in sites, such as delicious.com, that allow you to explore and evaluate online resources in a collective way. These bookmarking sites can run inside your browser. When you see a site you like, with one key stroke it can be added to your bookmarked list, which is then automatically organized by the frequency and prominence of keywords. The list that's compiled when you create bookmarks can then be easily shared with colleagues and you have access to their lists. If I've got a question relating to alternative medicine, for example, I'll turn to the bookmarks of a colleague who is a specialist in that area because I know he has already vetted them for me. All of us are smarter than any one of us.

► **Patient Education:** If a patient needs information, I turn to sites vetted by government agencies or medical organizations such as the American Academy of Family Physicians. The AAFP's site, www.familydoctor.org, has handouts and short video clips on a variety of topics.

The National Library of Medicine (http://medlineplus.gov) provides patient-oriented, one-page overviews with links to more detailed information at other reviewed sites, providing "one-stop" shopping for patient information.

The Mayo Clinic's site (www.mayoclinic.com) is frequently referenced by the NLM and provides reliable, well-written patient handouts.

Despite the fact that 54% of our residency program clinic patients are on Medicaid, a large number have access to a computer to look at these sites.

► **Physician Education:** When I'm searching for information for my own purposes, I use the same rule of thumb: Well-worn paths are best. When I'm looking for a high-level overview or when I can't remember a specific fact, I'll go to www.fpnotebook.com, which offers a lot of information for free. Another site that offers information for free is www.emedicine.com.

Through our hospital and residency program affiliate, I have access to www.uptodate.com, which is a fee-based resource with reliable information.

The 600-pound gorilla for drug information, of course, is www.epocrates.com.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's electronic Preventive Services Selector (www.epss.ahrq.gov) offers downloadable applications that are useful for remembering preventive services that an individual may need. So if you have a new 48-year-old male patient who smokes, the application suggests a list of evidence-based screening services.

For guidelines on any topic, go to www.guidelines.gov. Guidelines from www.nhlbi.gov probably cover about 80% of my day.

To some degree I worry about physicians who aren't checking Web resources. As Dr. Larry Weed, the pioneer visionary of the information age in health care, once suggested: If you want to go on a trip, you don't go to a travel agent who has memorized all of the flight boarding times, you go to someone who knows how to utilize resources to pick the best trip for you.

Our memory of what we learned in medical school is imperfect. And what was true back then, has probably changed. ■

DR. ZIEMKOWSKI *is the family medicine clerkship director at Michigan State University/Kalamazoo Center for Medical Studies. He has no conflicts of interest with any of the Web sites in this column.*