Low-Income Patients Able, Willing to Use E-Mail

BY ROBERT FINN
San Francisco Bureau

HONOLULU — The "digital divide" separating society's haves and have-nots may not be as deep as many fear, according to a study of 120 parents of adolescent patients and the patients themselves.

In a survey, more than 60% of parents and adolescents of low socioeconomic status (SES) from one Boston pediatric practice indicated a willingness to contact physicians via e-mail if given the option, said Dr. Tarissa Mitchell of Boston Medical Center.

Among survey respondents, 66% stated that they had access to e-mail and/or computers at home. But only 19% of the parents had their health care provider's e-mail address, and only 3% had ever used e-mail to contact their provider.

Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Shikha G. Anand of the Whittier Street Health Center, Roxbury, Mass., conducted a convenience sample survey at an urban community health center in Boston over a 4-month period. At that center, five pediatric providers serve 3,876 low SES children, 84% of whom are publicly insured and 82% of whom self-identify as black or Hispanic.

Compared with respondents without e-mail availability at home, those with home e-mail availability were significantly more willing to contact their physicians: 77% vs. 33%, Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Anand wrote in a poster presented at the annual meeting of the Pediatric Academic Societies.

Only 13% of the respondents said they would never use e-mail to communicate with their provider. The most common reason given was a desire to telephone the office, but they also cited lack of access to e-mail, difficulty with the English language, concerns over bothering the doctor with e-mails, and an expectation of slower response time. In addition, 33% expressed concern that e-mail may not be private and could be reviewed by individuals other than their health care provider. ■