

On the Net

Internet addicts can get online help

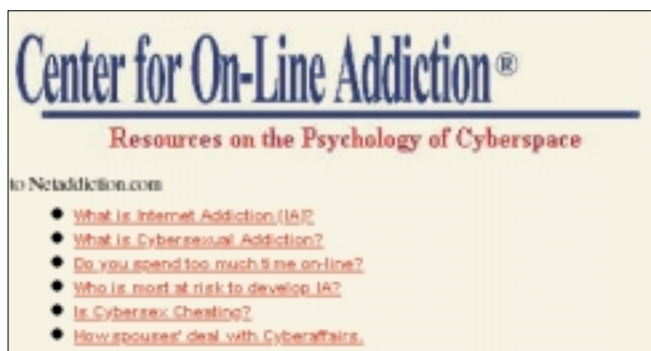
In 1995, psychologist Kimberly Young of the University of Pittsburgh coined the phrase Internet addiction (IA). Six years later, Young has opened the world's only "virtual clinic" to help people deal with their online problems.

Young, who bills herself as "the world's first cyberpsychologist," runs the Center for On-Line Addiction (www.netaddiction.com). It includes checklists of warning signs, tips on how to deal with problems and a self-administered assessment test. There is even a "cyberwidows" test aimed at spouses and tests to determine whether you are addicted to cybersex or online gambling.

"Impairment to real-life relationships appears to be the number-one problem caused by Internet addiction," says Young. "Internet addicts gradually spend less time with real people in their lives in exchange for solitary time in front of a computer."

Young's site says IA covers a variety of behaviours and impulse-control problems, including cybersex, cyber-relationships, online gambling and trading, excessive Web surfing and general addiction to computer games or programming.

Once identified as an online addict, people can surf over to Young's virtual clinic, where they can sign up for email,



online "chat" or telephone counselling. Have your credit card handy. A patient history is taken — online, of course — and then service commences. The cost runs from US\$15 US for a single email response "session" to US\$210 for 180 minutes worth of chat or telephone counselling. All major credit cards are accepted.

Although the online clinic does not offer any claims about its success rates, it does highlight the number of times Young's work has been featured in the mass media, in venues ranging from the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* to the BBC and *Good Morning America*. — *Michael O'Reilly, mike@oreilly.net*

Canadian research facility enters the big leagues

Winnipeg's national research facility received its first shipment of biosafety level-4 viruses, launching it into the elite company of 13 research facilities worldwide that are capable of handling these dangerous pathogens.

The Canadian Science Centre for Human and Animal Health received samples of the Ebola, Lassa, Marburg and Huanan viruses from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention June 8.

The year-old Winnipeg facility, operated jointly by Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, contains Canada's first biosafety level-4 laboratory and the world's first — and only — facility to combine human and animal health disease research facilities at the highest level of biocontainment. This means that researchers can collaborate as they study established and emerging diseases in human and animal populations. About 220 people now work at the \$200-million high-security facility. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

A scientific look at what comes naturally

After decades of working in isolation, Canadian researchers and physicians have come together to form the Natural Sourced Medicine Research Network. The organization, the first of its kind in Canada, aims to pool information about the efficacy and safety of natural medicines.

Dr. Tim Lee, professor of immunology at Dalhousie University and director of the research network, says a top priority is to develop a comprehensive database of clinical trials and other research involving natural medicines. This would include methodologic assessment of the research. Lee says "there's no good database that physicians or pharmacists can go to with information that's been reviewed scientifically."

The network, which grew out of a conference sponsored by Health Canada's Office of Natural Health Products, is built on a centre-of-excellence model. "We had 2 choices," says Lee. "Either create a national centre for research in this area or create what would be a virtual centre. This network is the forerunner of a virtual institute in natural-sourced medicine." Although it currently has no funding, the organizers hope to tap into federal funds through the new Office of Natural Health Products. — *Donalee Moulton, Halifax*