



Finding an Internet on-ramp

This column, which evaluates options for establishing an Internet connection, was written by Warren Lampitt (warren@gretmar.com). He and his wife, Timmins, Ont., family physician Karen Breeck, have been developing Internet resources for physicians for 2 years.

Commercial online services

Services such as the Microsoft Network (www.msn.com) and America Online (www.aol.com) offer subscribers special features, including custom software and enriched content. Consider them all-inclusive digital resorts: the surroundings are meticulously manicured, the visitors cheery and the staff painfully friendly. Unfortunately, the manicured version of cyberspace comes at a premium price. It gives you access to a structured online community that features premium news and entertainment services, moderated conferences and consumer services such as shopping and travel resources.

The chief drawback is that usually they are available only in larger cities. If your area doesn't have local telephone access to a commercial service, be sitting down when your first month's long-distance bill arrives. To offset this some services offer toll-free Internet access, but caveat emptor: charges may still be prohibitive. Always ensure that you clearly understand the rates before you connect.

If a commercial online service is the digital equivalent of an all-inclusive resort, then exploring the Web using an Internet service provider (ISP) is like putting on your backpack and going boldly where few have gone before.

ISPs simply connect you to the Internet. They may offer some extended services, but they rarely approach the levels of convenience offered by services like AOL. How-

Cool site

www.iatronet.net

IatroNet began as a bulletin-board service, a dial-in network offering e-mail, forums, access to encyclopedic CD-ROMs and connections to other networks, libraries and information resources. It was founded by Dr. Paul Pinkhasik of Richmond, BC, who designed it as a confidential platform that allowed BC physicians to exchange messages and files. Today IatroNet is on the Web, where its communications services and information resources are accessible by all physicians. Recent additions include new interactive forums and sources of software for the medical office. Pinkhasik (paulp@iatronet.net) encourages other physicians to provide their own information services to the rest of the medical community through IatroNet.

ever, they are much less expensive than these services and are available through a local telephone number — a point-of-presence, or POP.

Those about to succumb to the flashy campaigns of the giants should note that online communities are evolving on the Internet. These groups of like-minded "netizens" tend to cluster around a newsgroup, Web site or mailing list, where they share ideas and knowledge. In rural regions, an online community may develop around a group of physicians from neighbouring towns. The collective interests of these groups can create an environment as rich as that found in commercial online services.

When choosing an ISP, ask these questions:

Can I roam? In other words, when I travel can I access the Internet through POPs in neighbouring towns or across the country? Larger ISPs such as Bell Sympatico (www.sympatico.ca) and iStar (www.istar.ca) already offer or will offer access nationwide through local POPs.

What happens if I often get a busy signal? Check the number of modems the ISP has. How fast is my connection? If you hear numbers like 56K, 33-6 or 28-8, which refer to the speed of data transfer, relax, you are in the

fast lane. If you hear lower numbers, choose another ISP.

If you are new to computers and the Internet, a commercial service like AOL may help ease you gently into the digital realm. Take advantage of the free trials that many services use to entice new customers, but ensure that no long-distance charges are involved.

For those already comfortable with computers or who find that commercial online services do not offer sufficient depth, an ISP may offer the best option. They already offer economical Internet access in most parts of Canada.

Highlights from *CMA Online*

Looking for useful medical resources on the Internet? "WebMed Links" (www.cma.ca/other_r.htm; [French] www.cma.ca/other_f.htm) is a comprehensive list of sites, sorted by category and subject (specialty), that will be of use to physicians in practice and research. Included are links to clinical information, discussion groups, health information for patients, journals and newsletters, medical libraries and medical schools. We welcome contributions to this page. Use our online form to suggest sites that would benefit Canadian physicians.