



Creating your own medical Web site

A growing number of patients and professionals are using the Internet to seek health-related information, and doctors are helping meet the demand by creating their own Web sites. My hospital asked me to create a site on childhood asthma to include in its own site. Since much of the information available to the public is woefully out of date, it wasn't hard to convince me that I could provide much more current information in a more dynamic fashion.

I quickly learned that the Web's teaching power lies in its use of hypertext. Hypertext documents include hyperlinks — underlined text — which, when clicked on, lead the reader to related information. Hyperlinks allowed me to create vastly more informative documents than I could create on paper because they can link a medical term to explanatory text or a photo. The related information may be stored on the same Web page, somewhere else in the Web site or anywhere else on the Internet. A Web site may contain a single "page" or many linked pages.

Creating a site proved less difficult but more time consuming than I expected. To avoid duplication, I spent several hours visiting asthma sites. Some of the popular sites showed me what can be achieved with state-of-the-art Web design and the latest formatting features. To keep a visitor's interest my site had to look visually attractive and up-to-date, and it was important to match the Net's relatively informal writing style. My first Web page had all the literary appeal of an encyclopedia. I then went back and wrote what I tell new patients on a first visit to my chest clinic. The result was vastly more inviting.

The next step was to assemble material. Professional designers stress that content is the key to a successful site: it was essential that my site be as helpful and informative as possible. Web-page creation itself isn't difficult. Most word processors can translate a document into the hypertext mark-up language (HTML) used on the Web. As well, Web browsers now contain "editors" that let you create Web sites from scratch. Most of these are free for academic users. A dedicated Web-creation program provides more sophisticated features.

There is a legal aspect to physicians' Web pages. Readers must realize that they should not use your site for the diagnosis or treatment of a condition. My hospital's lawyer prepared a disclaimer (www.cheo.on.ca/asthma/disclaim.htm) to ensure users were aware of this. My nightmare scenario was to return from a conference to find an email seeking advice on a child with asthma in Peru who had started turning blue 5 days earlier. Unless you're prepared to give advice concerning patients you've never seen, do not include your email address on the site.

Credibility of information is a major issue on the Internet. Including your site within a larger site published by a major organization such as a hospital will markedly enhance the credibility of its information.

The next step, debugging the site, was tedious but essential. I had to ensure that each page was not so large that loading it would take too long on an old computer with a slow modem. I also had to verify that graphics appeared correctly on each page and that every link took readers where I wanted them to go. Each site-creation program inserts codes that can only be read by 1 of the 2 popular Internet browsers, Netscape and Mi-

crosoft Internet Explorer. Someone helped me remove such codes wherever possible. "Publishing" the site meant that the HTML pages had to be moved from my computer to the hospital's Web server. The hospital's computer network department helped accomplish this.

Finally, my site needed promotion and publicity. With more than 25 million sites available, I couldn't assume that the intended audience would find my creation. I notified the major search engines about my site, put posters in my clinic and received coverage in *CMAJ*, *Sympatico NetLife* magazine and the *Medical Post*.

Developing my asthma (www.cheo.on.ca/asthma/disclaim.htm) and bronchopulmonary dysplasia (www.cheo.on.ca/bpd/index.html) sites each took about 100 nonpaid evening hours. As the current commercial rate for creating a small Web site is about \$15 000, doing it myself proved a great deal cheaper, gave me much more control over the results and taught me a lot about the Internet. The result, I hope, is a useful source of information for parents of patients with asthma in Canada and around the world. — Dr. Thomas Kovesi, Pediatric Respirologist, Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, Ottawa.

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