

On the Net

Quack watchers casting wider net

Online health services are one of the fastest-growing and biggest sectors on the Internet, with millions of dollars changing hands on Wall Street and Bay Street as companies jostle to stake their claims. But like all gold rushes, this one is attracting everyone from genuine professionals to quacks and wily con artists.



Medical quackery is nothing new to health care, but the ease of Internet publishing is bringing out snakeoil salesmen. Luckily, there has been parallel growth in the “quack watch” business, with the number of Web sites keeping track of dubious information growing steadily.

Dr. Terry Polevoy has been in the quack-busting business

for several years. A pediatrician who runs clinics in Waterloo and London, Ont., he currently hosts several sites dedicated to shedding light on questionable medical claims. His premier site, HealthWatcher (www.healthwatcher.net) highlights current medical fads, unsubstantiated claims and outright fraud touted on the Internet. He says there is a huge amount of nonmedical and “pseudomedical” quackery in Canada, with the Internet being the main repository.

The American equivalent of HealthWatcher is Quack Watch (www.quackwatch.com). This site, hosted by Dr. Stephen Barrett, a retired psychiatrist in Allentown, Pennsylvania, includes an extensive list of questionable sites and practitioners. He even has a simple checklist to help people spot a fraudulent medical site (www.quackwatch.com/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/quackweb.html).

The American National Council for Reliable Health Information (www.ncrhi.org) is a nonprofit agency that focuses on health fraud, misinformation and quackery. Visitors can find lists of reliable and unreliable sites, along with a discussion group and a Hall of Shame.

The Georgia Council Against Health Fraud has gone even further. Its Healthcare Reality Check site (www.hcrc.org) not only names offensive Web sites but also issues an award for the worst medical coverage in the media.

So far the council has awarded a “Golden Duck” to *Good Housekeeping* for its story promoting a cancer quack, to NBC TV for a story on the “Power of Prayer” and to Bill Moyers for his piece entitled “Healing and the Mind.” — *Michael O'Reilly, mike@oreilly.net*

BC atherosclerosis reversal clinic graduates first patients

A Vancouver clinic that takes patients with heart damage and uses rigorous diet and exercise requirements in an attempt to prevent further disease graduated its first patients last month. The Atherosclerosis Reversal Clinic (ARC) at the St. Paul's Hospital is now in its second year. The first 137 patients — 32 women and 105 men — began leaving the program last month; only 5 have dropped out. The patients, aged between 40 and 65, have significantly lowered their weight and cholesterol levels, and kept them low. But it hasn't been easy.

Although the selected patients were deemed to be highly motivated, Kori Kingsley, cardiovascular nurse with ARC, says even dedicated patients have ups and downs. Those with a strong support system who prioritized demands, ex-

ercised 5 days a week and shopped for appropriate food did best. A confident outlook is also essential, says Kingsley.

She and Dr. Sammy Chan, a cardiologist with ARC, have learned that it takes up to 6 months for these patients to benefit from the program. In the initial 4 months, 6 follow-up visits with dietitians, exercise specialists and others are important motivators. Those sessions are “almost like a confessional,” says Kingsley.

At the end of the 2 years, ultrasound measurements that gauge the status of patients' atherosclerosis will be compared with those taken at the outset. The staff will also look at cost-effectiveness. The ARC is funded by a \$250 000, no-strings grant from a drug company. — *Heather Kent, Vancouver*