

On the Net

Online information and support for depressed patients

Depression can be a private disorder that goes unrecognized and untreated. Fortunately, the Internet has literally hundred of online resources for these patients, including a couple that help people assess the extent of their problem.

The Internet Mental Health site (www.mentalhealth.com) is a recognized online leader in this area. Created by Vancouver psychiatrist Phillip Long, the site has received numerous awards from professional and Web-based organizations.

The site describes itself as an encyclopedia of mental health information and includes information and descriptions of various disorders, notes about various mental health drugs and an online magazine of current news and research.

One of the more interesting sections includes an online diagnosis tool; various questionnaires cover many disorder areas, including depression. It can either

be taken by the patient or administered by a clinician. In each case it delivers a basic diagnosis and treatment plan.

The site stresses that this is only a tool: "This program is offered by Internet Mental Health as an aid to diagnosis and is not a substitute for expert clinical judgement by a licensed mental health professional."

The US-based National Mental Health Association has a similar tool (www.depression-screening.org) that offers plenty of information about various depressive disorders and includes a self-directed screening tool. Shela Halper, vice-president of public education at the NMHA, stresses that this online service is not meant to be the only tool used to identify the problem.

"It is important that people understand this Web site can not and should not substitute for a visit to their doctor or a qualified mental health profes-

sional," states Halper. "It is designed only to be a first step. While screening tests can help uncover the symptoms, they can not provide a diagnosis for depression."



Finally, for patients wanting interaction with others, there are online discussion groups in the ALT.SUPPORT.DEPRESSION and SOC.SUPPORT.DEPRESSION areas of Usenet. — *Michael O'Reilly, mike@oreilly.net*

Hawaii first to pass medical marijuana bill

Hawaii has become the first state to legalize the growth, possession and use of marijuana for prescribed medical purposes.

Under the new Hawaii law, which came into effect in June, patients with qualifying illnesses must obtain a doctor's recommendation to use marijuana. They must then register with the state's Department of Public Safety to avoid criminal charges. An estimated 500 to 1000 people in Hawaii are now eligible to grow, possess and use medical marijuana if they have registered with the state.

A national advocacy group, the Marijuana Policy Project (www.mpp.org), calls the Hawaii law "landmark legislation" that could make it easier to have similar laws approved in other states. The group is working to have medical marijuana bills introduced in 40 other states. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

Fire-safe cigarettes ignite New York

Within 3 years, New York will be the first US state to sell only fire-safe, self-extinguishing cigarettes. The move is designed to cut down on fires caused by careless smokers, which account for at least one-third of US fire deaths. About 1000 Americans and 100 Canadians die in such fires each year (*CMAJ* 2000;163[1]:73).

When New York's legislation takes effect July 1, 2003, wholesalers who sell regular cigarettes will be subject to \$10 000 fines; retailers will be fined \$500 for selling up to 5 cartons of the cigarettes and \$1000 for selling more than 5 cartons. Massachusetts is considering similar legislation.

Philip Morris USA, the country's biggest cigarette manufacturer, test marketed its new fire-safe cigarettes in 2 US cities for 6 months, with positive results. "It's absolutely a good idea," says spokesperson Katie Otto. The company's new "reduced-ignition-propensity cigarettes" have rings of ultra thin paper on top of the regular paper; they act as speed bumps to slow down the rate of burning.

Industry critics say the technology for fire-safe cigarettes has been available for a century, but Otto says Phillip Morris didn't start development until the late 1980s. Its biggest concern, aside from fire safety, was to ensure that the cigarette tasted the same so consumers wouldn't switch to a brand that wasn't fire safe.

The tobacco industry now wants national fire-safe standards established throughout the US, as "opposed to 50 conflicting standards." There are no national standards in Canada. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*