

Patient/Physician Online Communication: Many patients want it, would pay for it, and it would influence their choice of doctors and health plans.

Currently very few people communicate with their physicians online and most physicians have serious reservations about giving patients their email addresses because (as earlier Harris Interactive research has shown) of concerns about reimbursement, privacy of patient information and potential malpractice liability.

This will surely change. Most of those who are online want to be able to fix appointments, ask questions, refill prescriptions and receive diagnostic test results over the Internet. More than a third of those online say they would be willing to pay to be able to do this. And most of those online say they would be influenced in their choices of doctors and health plans if some of them made online communications possible and others did not.

What patients would like to be able to do online

Almost all (90%) of those online (the 66% of all adults who are online from home, office, school, library or somewhere else) would like to be able to communicate with their physicians online. More than two-thirds of them would like to be able to do each of the following: ask questions where no visit is necessary (77%), fix appointments (71%), refill prescriptions (71%), and receive the results of medical tests (70%).

TABLE 1

What Patients Would Like To Do Online

"If you could do so, which of the following would you like to be able to do online with your doctor or doctors?"

Base: All adults who are online

	%
Ask questions where no visit is necessary	77
Fix appointments	71
Get new prescriptions for medications you take	71
Receive the results of medical tests	70
None of these	6
Don't know	4

How many patients would pay? And how much?

Over a third (37%) of all those online say they would be willing to pay out-of-pocket for the ability to communicate online with their physicians. The more affluent people are, the more likely they would be willing to pay for this.

If they were required to pay a fixed amount each month to be able to do this, they (the 37% of all those online who would be willing to pay) say they would pay, on average, just over \$10 a month.

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If, alternatively, they were required to pay each time they sent an email (and received a reply), they say that, on average, they would pay almost \$7 each time.

The questions in this survey did not suggest that this might actually save patients' money, which might otherwise have been spent visiting the doctor (to refill a prescription, for example). Had it done so, no doubt more people would have been willing to pay, and to pay more.

TABLE 2

Would You Be Willing To Pay?

"Many doctors are reluctant to give patients their email addresses because they feel they may have a lot of email correspondence for which they will not get paid. Would you be willing to pay something for the ability to send and receive emails to and from your doctor(s) instead of having to visit or call them?"

Base: All adults who are online

	Total %	Income Less Than \$15K %	\$15K-\$24.9K %	\$25K-\$34.9K %	\$35K-\$49.9K %	\$50K-\$74.9K %	\$75K %
Yes, would be willing to pay something	37	33	34	28	38	41	45
No	39	46	40	42	36	36	39
Don't know	24	21	27	31	26	22	16

TABLE 3

How Much Would You Pay – If Fixed Monthly Amount?

"If you could do this by paying a fixed amount each month to your doctor, how much would you be willing to pay so that you could communicate by email?"

Base: Those who would be willing to pay something

	%
\$1 - \$5	42
\$6 - \$10	33
More than \$10	25
MEAN	\$10.6
MEDIAN	\$10.2

TABLE 4

How Much Would You Pay – If Paid For Each Message And Reply?

"If you could do this by paying a fixed amount every time you sent an email which would then be answered free of charge, how much would you be willing to pay each time (your message and the reply)?"

Base: Those who would be willing to pay something

	%
\$1	22
\$2	11
\$3	3
\$4	*
\$5	35
More than \$5	28
MEAN	\$6.9
MEDIAN	\$5.1

Could this influence consumer choice of health plans and doctors?

Most (55%) of those online say that if one health plan enabled them to communicate with their doctors online and another did not, this would influence their choice of plans. A significant minority (12%) says they would be influenced “a great deal”.

Most (56%) also say that if one doctor allowed them to communicate online and another did not, this would influence their choice of physicians. One in seven (14%) say this would influence them “a great deal”.

TABLE 5

Would Ability To Communicate Online Influence Choice Of Health Plans?

“If you could choose between two health plans, one but only one of which allowed you to send and receive emails to and from your doctor(s), how much would this influence your choice of plans?”

Base: All adults who are online

	Total %
A great deal	12
Somewhat	43
Not much	26
Not at all	12
Don't know	6

TABLE 6

Would Ability To Communicate Online Influence Choice Of Doctors?

“If you could choose between two doctors, one but only one of which allowed you to send and receive emails, how much would this influence your choice of doctors?”

Base: All adults who are online

	Total %
A great deal	14
Somewhat	42
Not much	25
Not at all	14
Don't know	5

So what?

Several organizations are working on ways to address the malpractice liability and medical records' privacy issues in online communications between doctors and patients. If they do so successfully, the main barriers will be reimbursement and financial incentives for doctors.

When so many people want something – in this case the ability to communicate online with their physicians – the system (or the marketplace) will eventually provide it. It seems safe to predict that within a fairly short space of time many doctors will be communicating with their patients on the Internet. This will happen because some doctors and health plans will use this as a way to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Some doctors will embrace this as an opportunity to grow their practices. Some health plans will require, or incent, physicians to be accessible online. It is only a question of how quickly this will happen.

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