INTERNET AND PSYCHIATRY

Sir,

As we are approaching the new millennium, the communication technology is expanding rapidly and is producing its impact in almost all disciplines of life. The maturing of technologies has ushered in a whole new era of applications and services in the health care environment. Teleworking, teleconsultation, multimedia conferencing and medical data distribution are rapidly becoming commonplace in clinical practice. The Internet is a rapidly growing communication resource that is beginning to have an impact on medicine, and it is anticipated that the Internet will soon have a major impact on psychiatry. The Internet has great potential in psychiatric education, clinical care, research, and administration.

Advances in information technology now offer several options for the psychiatrists to navigate the increasingly complex terrain of scientific literature and keep abreast of the rapidly changing advances in our field. There are different websites on Internet through which information on any area of psychiatry can be acquired. Medline, the world’s largest database of medical literature, can be accessed and searched by a variety of free or fee-based services. In addition to efficient retrieval of citations and abstracts based on subject, author, or title, many of these services now provide, for a fee, the entire text and graphics of articles (displayed on computer screen, faxed, or mailed). Internet has become useful for collaborative learning. There are claims of achieving a range of educational objectives including use of e-mail, improvement in care planning technique, developing abilities to constructively criticise the work of others, to learn from and share in the experience of others. Psychiatrists have already started discussing the common issues. There are various discussion groups and “Psychnet-Sasia” is made mainly for the SAARC Psychiatrists to collaborate. Study of patients with rare diseases
has become more easy by using the world wide web technology which allows efficient dissemination and exchange of information (De Groen et al, 1998).

It has become possible to electronically link Integrated Health Care Delivery Systems and geographically distant information resources. Internet can also be used by general public as a resource to obtain information about psychiatric illnesses. They can already read electronic articles about different psychiatric disorders or join electronic support groups, self-help groups and discussion groups (Huang & Alessi, 1995). E-mail counselling has also been advocated. Electronic transmission of medical records are now technologically quite easy (Bourke, 1994). The greatest obstacle to electronic transfer of medical records at this point is the development of workable standards for signing agreements and protecting transmissions, but the perceived advantages will likely drive the necessary developments. In addition to serving patients, educational materials may be developed for training psychiatrists and provide continuing education (Felciano & Dev, 1994).

American Psychiatrists Association (APA) is creating a presence on the World Wide Web (unpublished report on the APA electronic communications project to the American Association of Directors of Psychiatry Residency Training, January 1996). It plans to use the Web site to reach the general public, increasing patient awareness and education, providing general information on treatment and diagnosis, and providing referral sources to patients. APA also plans to use its web site to unify its organization, providing information on dues and other membership business, distributing newsletter and meeting information, and surveying the membership for both research and governance data.

The growth of the Internet and related information technologies is inevitable. As psychiatrists, we must remain effective communicators of information and adjust to a changing world with new roles and skills that will permit us to best serve our professional mission.

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