

Secrets of online medical information revealed.

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It used to be that all medical information was held secretly by members of the medical profession. Medline, the medical literature database, required a costly subscription like Westlaw and Lexis. Without Medline, to obtain medical information, one must hire the services of an expensive medical expert. Thanks to the Internet, the secrets of the medical profession have been unleashed and are free and accessible to anyone with Internet access.

Medical issues pervade almost any type of case. As attorneys, we have a duty to our clients to obtain all the medical information necessary to adequately represent our clients. The Internet offers more medical information than imaginable. But, how do we know what all the medical information means.

First, there are Internet sites to interpret the secret language. Medical forensics are used in criminal law and personal injuries are the basis of most civil matters. The Merck Manual, a bible for many attorneys to understand medical terminology, is available online at www.merck.com. The Merck site provides information on medical abbreviations, symbols and terminology. Unfortunately the entire text of the Merck Manual is not online because they still want to sell their books.

On the internet, the user can obtain information on prescription medications. The Physicians Desk Reference (PDR), used to be another one of those the must have books for attorneys. The PDR is simply the package insert of all prescription drugs. If the attorney knows the manufacturer of a brand name medication, he can go to their website and find the same information for free. If the name of manufacturer is not available, a search on any of the search engines may yield a result. There are also general pharmacy sites like www.druginfonet.com or www.pharminfonet.com. These sites will give you information on each medication and links to many of the pharmaceutical manufacturers' websites. These sites also contain additional information for consumers as well as health care professionals.

Medline, the medical journal database, is now available for free on the internet through the National Library of Medicine at www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PubMed/ or www.igm.nlm.nih.gov. Medline can be searched by two different search engines. One is called PubMed and the other is called Grateful Med. You will get the same results using either search engine. Both are easy to use and the instructions are readily available online. The disadvantage of Medline, unlike Westlaw or Lexis, is that for the most part, only abstracts are available online. With Grateful Med, the user can request a full text article through a service for a fee called Loansome Doc which will send the user the full text document. The user can also obtain full text documents for a fee from www.carl.org. The user can also obtain many full text articles immediately online through a subscription service at www.mdconsult.com.

Another secret of the medical profession is defining the standard of care. In medical malpractice, the standard of care is what a physician testifies to that other physicians would do acting under the same or similar circumstances. In other words, to prove a medical negligence case, a physician must testify against another physician. In any other negligence case, the jury must determine what is the standard of care. With the internet, the medical profession has published standards of care through its various organizations which are now on the internet. One site which has links to the various medical associations is www.mednets.com/associations.htm. The number of associations for each specialty is amazing.

Fee based sites are available to obtain medical information. The advantage of a fee based site is that instead of going to a separate site for each piece of information, the fee based sites include all the information in a one stop shopping package. Over 60 online textbooks and journals are available through www.mdconsult.com in addition to medical standards from over 1000 different organizations.

Lastly, with the voluminous amount of medical information available, it is important to ensure the accuracy of the information that we retrieve. The American Medical Association (AMA) has published an article entitled "Guidelines for medical and health information sites on the Internet." Naturally, the article can be found on their website at www.americanmedicalassociation.org. The AMA suggests to look at "authorship of content, attribution to the sources of the content, disclosure of funding and competing interest and timeliness of the information presented." Consequently, information directed to health care professionals which have peer reviewed content are the best to obtain high quality reliable information.

Now that the medical secrets are readily available, one can meet technology head on or do things the old fashioned way. One can purchase costly medical dictionaries and text books or simply click a button.

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