

PATIENT EDUCATION IN AN ERA OF SELF- DIAGNOSIS

By Naren Arulrajah



What is the most common condition among your patients? Depending on your specialty, you might give an answer such as acne, varicose veins, or physical deformities. However, there is one problem that is probably more prevalent, and it challenges doctors of all specialties. It is online self-diagnosis.

Today's patients are less likely to ask how an aesthetic problem can be improved, or what caused a rash. A person may walk into your office proclaiming a rare skin disease and demanding a specific prescription to treat it. The next patient may tell you the best type, brand, size, and shape of implants before you even begin an examination. They aren't interested in diagnostics or treatment recommendations. They already "know" because they have Googled it

Unfortunately, Dr. Google isn't a great diagnostician. There is medical information on the internet, but myths, rumors, misleading, and blatantly false information are even more abundant. How do you handle self-diagnosing, or even self-treating, patients? If you haven't found a good answer yet, here are four winning strategies to try.

LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND

When a patient presents you with information found online, it may be tempting to dismiss it out of hand. However, this can make the patient feel belittled, or think that you don't listen. Instead, hear the person out, and acknowledge their efforts. Gently correct misinformation and misinterpretations.

START A CONVERSATION

A self-diagnosis, even an inaccurate one, can open a productive discussion that leads to real answers. In most cases, the individual read an article or watched a video that resonated with his or her experience. A description of a disease included symptoms that match what the person is feeling, or a certain treatment promised benefits that precisely match his or her goals. Ask leading questions; use the opportunity to open a productive dialog.

BY THE NUMBERS: ONLINE SELF-DIAGNOSIS

35% US adults say they have gone online specifically to try to figure out what medical condition they or someone else might have.

46% Online diagnosers say information found online led them to think they needed the attention of a medical professional.

41% Online diagnosers say a medical professional confirmed their diagnosis. **35%** Did not visit a clinician to get a professional opinion.

18% Consulted a medical professional and the clinician either did not agree or offered a different opinion about the condition

1% Conversation with a clinician was inconclusive.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

To the frustration of many physicians, the popularity of alternative medicine is skyrocketing. Even if you do not endorse these techniques, it is important that you are willing to discuss them. If a treatment is low-risk, but probably ineffective, explain this. Similarly, keep an open mind to unproven treatments that may have potential benefits. Refrain from overstating risks or making blanket statements about safety and effectiveness. This moderate approach will give more credibility to your words when you warn patients about fraudulent products, harmful home remedies, and "treatments" that have been proven ineffective.

FIGHT BACK AGAINST MISINFORMATION

We often blame Facebook, Instagram, and other social networks for the proliferation of hoaxes, dangerous DIY beauty trends, and health related myths. However, that isn't where people are looking for medical information. About a third of Americans go online looking for health diagnostic information, but only one percent of them rely on social media. The vast majority of them turn to Google.

BE THEIR SOURCE

If your patients are getting crazy ideas from the internet, they probably started with a search. This is one of many reasons why it is so important for dermatologists and plastic surgeons to maintain quality websites. You can help counteract the flood of misinformation by providing factual and easy to understand patient education. Think of the questions patients ask most often, the most common misconceptions, and the things you wish they knew. Then build content, such as videos, articles, and blogs, around those topics.



Naren Arulrajah is President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, a complete internet marketing company that focuses on SEO, social media, marketing education, and the online reputations of dermatologists and plastic surgeons. With a team of 140+ full time marketers, www.ekwa.com helps doctors who know where they want to go, get there by dominating their market and growing their business significantly year after year. If you have questions about marketing your practice online, call 855-598-3320 to speak one-on-one with Naren.