

GOOD MEDICINE?;
A tech-savvy reporter decides to get all of her medical needs satisfied
without leaving her cubicle at the office.

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Body

If I had any illusion that I was part of the technology revolution, my last doctor's visit set me straight. It went something like this:

Skip lunch. Apply time toward inconvenient 2 p.m. appointment in the middle of workday. Drive 23 miles to dreary office in strip mall.

Fill out medical history while woman with a dangerous-sounding chest cold tells me about Princess Diana. Read about Princess Diana in People. Slip on embarrassingly tiny hospital gown and wait on metal table. See doctor for 10-minute "Well Woman's Visit." Hop back on the Garden Grove (22) Freeway in time for rush hour. Stare at mountains behind a brown and blue haze, turn up air, creep toward work.

This was not the medicine of my future. After all, I am a woman reachable 24-7 by pager or cell phone. I manage a bicoastal life. I lug a laptop everywhere. I love the World Wide Web.

So I decided to conduct a little 21st-century experiment: I would get all of my physical health, mental health and medication needs taken care of in the privacy of my own cubicle _ online.

It was going to be so simple.

I began with several goals. First, since my (former) doctor was rushed, I hadn't had time to request medicine for two new ailments: allergies and migraines. I would get them now on my own. Then, I needed some advice on managing work stress. Last, I was concerned about my cholesterol and blood pressure.

Now, some might consider ordering a prescription drug without a

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prescription _ or even an online doctor's evaluation _ from a Thai pharmacy walking the edge. I'd read about Pharmacy International.com in the magazine California Physician. It's one of the growing number of Internet drugstores overseas that will ship medication to anyone in the United States with a valid credit card.

I took out my Visa.

Pharmacy International doesn't tell you who they are. Just that they are one of the largest distributors of legal drugs on the Indochinese/Indian subcontinent. And that drugs manufactured in Third World countries are far cheaper than the same drugs produced in the United States, which is why the site boasts "LOWEST PRICES GUARANTEED" on the top of its home page.

I clicked on the "latest price list" and up popped a supermarket of drugs. I scrolled through, bypassing codeine (now that might be illegal), settling on two orders of Imitrex, a migraine drug selling for \$ 21.30 for two 50-mg pills. I also chose 100 600-mg Ibuprofen capsules, price \$ 11.80, for lighter headaches.

Since the prices were no more than Rite Aid lists on

Drugstore.com, I called up the Pharmacy International order form. I was met with a bold warning.

It seems that a growing number of shipments to the United States are being "stolen" by U.S. Customs, apparently because agents open up packages to check on the legality of shipments. For an extra 20 percent delivery insurance, the pharmacy would ship me my order one

more time if it turned up missing. I decided to take my chances.

I agreed to the following conditions: I am at least 18 years old (I am). I checked the medication importation laws in my country (I did not). The products I am purchasing are for my own use (they are); I'm using them under the supervision of my physician (you know the answer to that).

My total: \$ 54.40. No consultation. No prescription. No hassle.

The Thai Postal service would have my new drugs waiting at my house, on average, in 28 days. It could take as long as 45 days.

But if I got a migraine next week, I'd find myself back in a packed waiting room.

Since I'd taken Imitrex before in a hospital emergency room, I wasn't worried about ordering it without a doctor's advice. But it

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would be my first time on the anti-allergy medication Claritin, so I turned to Canadian online pharmacy MDHealthline.com, which requires a doctor's evaluation. It went something like this:

"Do you experience allergies? " Yes.

"Do you have any of the following medical problems? " (Liver disease, coronary artery disease, etc.) No.

"Do you have any known allergies to medications? " No.

OK, we'll let you know.

Two days later, a UPS package was waiting on my front stoop.

Inside was a bottle of Claritin issued by a doctor I'd never heard of in Phoenix. Total cost: \$ 65 for the consultation; \$ 81 for a month's supply; and \$ 16 for shipping. This was far more expensive than Rite Aid. They charge \$ 55.80 for 30 Claritin tablets, and if I'd gone to my doctor for a prescription I would have paid \$ 10 for the office visit, not \$ 65, and nothing for shipping.

Still, the problem was solved _ and I never left my desk. On to my next problem: I never leave my desk.

Breakfast, lunch, even dinner is sometimes eaten in a cubicle set for one, in between placating sources and placating editors. Is this healthy? Is there a professional I can consult without making any radical changes right away, like actually getting up?

Yes, according to a Yahoo search, which listed 65 online therapy sites.

I chose CounselingCafe.com for its soothing sky-blue background, drawing of a cup of coffee and sunflowers, and Julie Keck, Ph.D.'s self-description: "As a counselor, I am known to be calm, peaceful, focused, supportive, inspiring and fun. " Julie said I would feel less self-conscious e-mailing my issues, and no one would see me leaving a psychotherapy clinic!

She promised an answer within 12 to 24 hours at a cost of \$ 1 per minute. If it's helpful, you can do online therapy with Julie on a regular basis. She required a medication history and a symptom checklist. I checked: fatigue, confusion about career choices, muscle tension and "very goal directed. "

I wrote the following: "I'm working too much. Not only do I spend a lot of time at work but I think about work often. I plan projects on the weekends, or think about strategy on the way to

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work, instead of listening to the car radio. My mother says this is not good. Should I make changes or just accept that this is a career-focused time of my life? "

For a different perspective, I sent the same query to Cyberpsych.com for \$ 30. I'd receive an answer in 48 to 72 hours from an anonymous psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker ready to help me with the "problems of modern living. " And I did.

Cyberpsych (whoever he or she is) wrote back in less than two days. I wasn't happy to hear that my mother is right. Julie responded with some additional questions, after I prompted her with a phone call. She's still trying to figure out my case.

My last need was my cholesterol. I went to Expressdoctors.com. This Palm Springs-based site will send a doctor to your home, office or hotel any time of the day or night _ in one hour. Well, they'll try. At 11 a.m. Friday, I typed in my request: blood pressure, cholesterol and glucose level. At my desk in Santa Ana.

Exactly three minutes later, I received a call from Richard at the company's call center. He asked if I was on any medications.

Fifteen minutes later I got a call from Rochelle saying the doctor couldn't come until 7 p.m.

"Why not? " I asked.

"Well you're asking us to draw blood, which is something we don't normally do. And besides, the doctor works during the day, too, you know," she said.

Expressdoctors and I spoke a dozen times, but in the end their two doctors in Orange County did not want to visit a newspaper.

So am I a convert to online medicine?

Well, not unless I hit megabucks. This stuff can be expensive _ I spent about \$ 300 for services that would have cost me \$ 100 to \$ 200 if obtained through my doctor and insurance plan. And while all the sites say insurance companies reimburse for their services, I doubt Blue Cross of California is going to send \$ 54.40 to a Thai pharmacy or pay for a doctor not in its network _ especially when a cholesterol reading could have waited for a routine office visit.

At least not without a tiring, time-consuming fight.

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When I **called** Blue Cross, a junior representative put me on hold for 10 minutes before telling me "that's definitely not covered. "

Do I feel I'm risking my health? Well, I don't know what the FDA is like in Thailand, so I'm not too comfortable taking Imitrex manufactured in a country with whose standards I'm not familiar. As for Claritin from Canada, no problem. The evaluation seemed complete, and I can just **call** my doctor and double-check. And I'll definitely order my existing prescriptions online through Drugstore.com's RiteAid option. It automatically sends the order to the store a mile from my house.

As for online therapy, it's a good idea for someone who won't begin therapy without anonymity, but I wouldn't rely on it. Having a back-and-forth dialogue takes days by e-mail. And who wants to have a relationship with a team of people who collectively **call** themselves 'CyberPsych'? An in-person or telephone relationship seems **more** satisfying.

Sad to say, I wasn't bothered by the impersonal nature of it all. It's hard to develop a relationship with a doctor anyway.

Employers change insurers. Insurers switch doctors' groups. The doctors' group dumps you. And even if they don't, doctors just don't have time to get to know you like they used to.

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(SIDEBAR)

With the anonymity of the Web, it's hard to know who is diagnosing you and doling out drugs.

Before you, too, abandon your doctor and become an Internet patient, consider the warnings of several health organizations and agencies.

Just because there are online doctors willing to treat you, said Dr. Joseph Scherger, don't assume the treatment will be thorough or appropriate.

"There's a lot of money to be made and people are out there trying to make a quick buck," said Scherger, associate dean of clinical affairs at the University of California, Irvine.

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"Unfortunately, there is no shortage of doctors without ethics, who will treat a patient without an evaluation. "

Scherger advises patients and prescribes medication by e-mail, but said he follows the guidelines of the American Medical Association: He only treats patients with whom he has an ongoing relationship and has evaluated in person.

The AMA recommends that physicians prescribing online obtain a patient's medical history, generally including a physical exam; discuss treatment options with the patient; disclose the drug's benefits and risks; and arrange for follow-up.

Some of the Web's estimated 400 prescription sites not only don't follow these safeguards, they'll provide a drug with as little information as the buyer's name, address and credit card number.

In most states, including California, physicians cannot prescribe drugs unless they are licensed in the state. And every state medical board agrees that prescribing drugs without a physical exam is substandard care, the AMA says. But tracking down those doctors is difficult since many Web sites operate in virtual anonymity, providing no business address or doctors' names.

University of Pennsylvania researchers studied 46 Web sites selling medications. They found that none revealed the names and qualifications of their doctors, and only five disclosed the location of the business. Online consultations to obtain prescriptions cost more than visits to primary-care doctors, and two popular drugs _ Viagra and Propecia _ cost more online than in the pharmacy.

The study, released in advance of its December publication date by the Annals of Internal Medicine, also highlighted one of the most serious concerns about online prescribing: Nine sites, all outside the U.S., did not require a doctor's prescription.

PharmacyInternational.com, for instance, provides a grocery list of drugs, including codeine, that it will mail from Thailand without a prescription or even an evaluation.

Health officials say the dangers are numerous: Consumers have no way to know if they've actually received the drug they ordered, or even if it's the correct strength. And without a doctor's advice, they could end up taking something that's deadly when combined with

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other medications or with an underlying medical condition.

The study's lead author, Bernard Bloom, said the law allows wiggle room for these overseas sites. It's legal to import three months worth of a medication from a foreign country for personal use.

The Food and Drug Administration and the Federal Trade Commission are contemplating ways to crack down on these sites, including pushing for a law that requires disclosure of the business's name, address and telephone number. The FTC has the authority to take action against Web sites that provide false information about drugs, and the FDA regulates the illegal dispensing of drugs without a prescription.

But without the name of a company to go after, the laws are useless.

The California Medical Board, which can discipline California doctors who prescribe improperly online, is considering taking action to stop out-of-state e-mail doctors. The Kansas attorney general obtained restraining orders against five out-of-state sites, and they now will not ship drugs to Kansas.

Bloom said he's skeptical that law enforcement will solve the problem.

"All you have to do is close down the old Web site and they'll open a new one and be back in business again. How do you control that? " he said. "To me it all comes down to consumers. Are they willing to pay more money for the convenience and take the risk that it's not really a physician behind that screen? It could be your Uncle Louie, for all you know. "

(CHART-LIST)

GETTING STARTED

Want to get health care over the Internet? Here's how to start:

* For therapy sites, plug "online therapy" or "Internet psychologists" into any search engine and dozens of sites will pop up. You can expect more extended and personal attention from the sites of individual doctors. Sites that use many anonymous doctors are usually one-shot deals.

* You can find pharmacy sites using the same method _ type in

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"Internet" and "pharmacy." " You'll get a wide range of possibilities, including sites that require an existing prescription and simply allow you to order your medication, those that evaluate and prescribe online, and international pharmacies that only require a credit-card number.

* For a "non-life-threatening emergency," ***call*** up

www.expressdoctors.com. *They'll* try to send a doctor to your office, hotel or home within one hour. But be prepared to pay _ and to wait if you live in a congested or rural region.

Graphic

ILLUSTRATION; CHART; CHART-LIST - GETTING STARTED - Want to get health care over the Internet? Here's how to start; (SEE END OF TEXT)

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