

## **Bahrain Doctors In the Internet Age**

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Doctors benefited great deal from the Internet. It had a major impact on the practice of medicine and Doctor patients' relationship. Emails played an important role in communicating with patients. Through email doctors receive the latest advance in medicine from their respective societies around the world. Doctors can read their medical journal on the Internet before they receive their hard copy. Web sites have proved to be great tool for conveying medical information to the public and communicating with the patient, for post treatment follow up or sometimes research study. With the vast knowledge stored, there is no instant library for upgrading your knowledge like the Internet. The Internet is greatly used by doctors for medical chat to discuss problem case and how to manage them. If these are the benefits, then let us compare the usage of Internet by Bahraini and USA doctors.

Emails play an important role for communicating with patients. It serves to educate the patients and function as a follow up of their conditions. Survey of patients' response to surgery or medication could easily be conducted through emails.

Again emails fulfill an important function as communicating media between the professional societies and their members. Many pharmaceutical and medical instrument companies send their information about their most recent drug or gadgets through emails. The latest advance in medicine and professional decision that may affect his practice is sent by emails.

Accessing and reading Doctor's favorite medical journal have become easy with the advent of the Internet. Doctors do not have to wait for 2-3 months to receive their recent issue of the journal. Furthermore, they do not have to worry about their issue being lost in the mail.

Doctors' web sites have become an important tool for conveying information to the patients. Patients can book their appointment through the doctor's web site, as well as cancellation of surgery or rescheduling. The web sites can be used for follow up of patients, survey and research studies.

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The Internet has changed our concept of library. The Internet has become the greatest library ever built, which can be visited by millions at one time. The knowledge stored in there is immense. There is no excuse for any doctor to blame the library not having so and so number of issues of that journal. There is no excuse for not being able to find the latest treatment on any rare condition and no excuse for not advising the patient about the center of excellence for any specific treatment. The Internet has become of great benefit for doctors in training, the knowledge they require daily and the knowledge they need for their postgraduate examination.

Doctors use the Internet for medical chat. It is unlike the others, they use the chat for entertainment. The purpose of these chats is to discuss difficult medical conditions with their colleagues from around the worlds. This helps the patient in receiving the best opinion from experts and it helps the doctors in upgrading their knowledge in managing difficult and rare conditions.

Conferences and scientific meetings are well advertised in the Internet. What the doctors need or lacking is there to satisfy his zeal for knowledge and quest for perfection. Sooner than we imagine, the conferences and meetings will be broadcast on the Internet. At that time doctors will be saving money and time, and they will be able to participate in many conferences as much as they wish. Consequently, they will be able to provide a better service and care for their patients.

Through improved multimedia and sooner than we imagine, patient's consultation would be possible over the Internet. Even difficult surgical procedures could be directed from a group of physicians to the others over the Internet.

These benefits have prompted me to look into the use of Internet by Bahraini doctors and compare that with the USA doctors. I made sure that the sample is equal in both countries.

For this purpose a sample of 981 doctors in Bahrain obtained from the Doctors and Dentists directory, which is printed by the ministry of health, health information directorate 2001. I found only 274 of them have emails (27.8%). Among those who have emails 143 Bahraini who are the majority (14.6% of the total sample and 52.2% of those who have emails). Hundred and thirty-one non-Bahraini who are the majority minority (13.3% of the total sample and 47.8% of those who have emails). Very few indeed have web sites and among those few, non-use the web sites as mean of communication with patients. Actually those who have web sites are mainly using it for personal profile. Ministry of health have a web site but non of the information on it is directed to the patient. It is rather concentrated on boasting its image and of some of the high officials.

Compare the previous statistics with the statistics obtained from a study conducted by the American medical association AMA's *2001 Technology Usage in Physician Practice Management* benchmark study, which is based on interviews with 981 practice administrators or managers in the United States from December 2000 to February 2001

More than 9 of 10 physicians use computers in their practices, and a majority of them use the Internet for medical research, legal and regulatory updates, and e-mail communication. Computers also are widely used in medical practices to perform a variety of electronic practice management functions, including claims processing, patient scheduling and coding. The study was based on interviews with 981 practice administrators or managers in the United States from December 2000 to February 2001. Key findings include:

Percentage of medical practices that use computers:

	<i>Solo/Two-physician practice</i>	<i>Group practice</i>
Use computers	93%	98%
Do not use computers, but plan to in next 12 months	1%	1%
Do not use computers and do not plan to in next 12 months	6%	1%

Common work-related purposes for which the Internet or other technology is used in the medical practice:

	<i>Solo/Two-physician practice</i>	<i>Group practice</i>
Claims processing	83%	94%
Medical research information	74%	82%
Continuing Medical Education for physicians	64%	70%
Legal and regulatory updates/compliance information	53%	70%
Patient scheduling	60%	91%
Coding	58%	61%

The study found that 23 percent of medical practices has someone who uses a handheld computer. Handheld computer tasks include keeping a calendar and appointments (78%), sending and receiving e-mail (33%), and checking medications (26%) and lab results (9%).

More than nine of 10 physicians use computers in their practices, according to a study released by the AMA. Medical research, legal and regulatory updates, and continuing medical education are among the tasks performed on computers. They also widely used to perform electronic practice management functions, including claims processing, patient scheduling and coding.

I was hoping to do this study on the total number of doctors in Bahrain, but when I called the health information directorate in the ministry of health, I was told that they do not know the total number of the Bahraini or the total non Bahraini doctors working in Bahrain.

In conclusion, the Internet has become an integral part of the practice of medicine. It certainly improved the patients' doctor relationship. It might be possible in the future, through improved multimedia to conduct a medical consultation through the Internet. Why we Doctors in Bahrain falling behind? Is there conspiracy by the big power to keep us out of the age of explosion of information? Or do we need to be given incentive to be involved in the information age? Or is there something wrong in our weather, which makes us pathetic and scared of the new information and new technology? The Internet was introduced to Bahrain in November 1995, but it was installed in Bahrain Medical Society in February 2000, which means five years behind its introduction in the country. Till today Bahrain medical society and

the ministry of health use mail and fax to communicate with doctors, never by emails. Many times practicing doctors are not informed about drug withdrawal or ban by pharmacy and drug control except through the pharmacy personnel, when their patient present his prescription. The reason in falling behind in the information technology is unknown. Whom to blame the government of Bahrain, USA or ourselves. The government of Bahrain seems to be, for the first time, innocent because they agreed to introduce the Internet to Bahrain in November 1995, though, it is expensive service, but it was in Bahrain before many Arab countries.

References:

*AMA's 2001 Technology Usage in Physician Practice Management benchmark study.*