



## The essential internet by the numbers

**Essential Research survey says GPs average 9.4 hours weekly.**

BY DON LAJOIE

Imagine for a moment that you couldn't "log on". No search engines to check a clinical diagnosis. Practice guidelines no longer downloadable. CME credits couldn't be earned in the comfort of your own home on a weekend morning, coffee in hand. What if you couldn't access cyberspace for a week or even a month? Would that affect the way you practice medicine?

In October 2008 we conducted in-depth online interviews with a nationally representative sample of 500 practicing Canadian primary care physicians and over two-thirds agreed with the statement that the internet is now essential to their practice. For today's MDs searching for productivity and work-life balance, the information highway is a good thing.

The average family physician will spend 9.4 hours each week on the internet, not counting email. Almost 40% of that will be for professional purposes. The amount of time is interesting but the usage patterns are perhaps more significant. Almost half the doctors are online between patient visits and around a quarter during patient visits. How does this correspond to your pattern of internet use?

Heavy users, those who log over 10 hours per week, make up almost a quarter of all family doctors and half of these spend more than 15 hours on the web, a figure which exceeds the average for the general population in this country.

Heavy users are generally male MDs residing in metropolitan areas with large patient loads and they tend to write an

above-average number of prescriptions. They are more likely to live in Ontario and less likely to reside in Quebec. This phenomenon isn't fully understood, but a partial explanation may be the smaller number of healthcare resources online in French. Internet usage in the general population is lower in Quebec than the rest of Canada so clearly there are other factors at work.

Our survey shows that most primary care doctors own desktop computers (84%), cell phones (81%), laptops (71%), PDAs (55%), and MP3 players (54%). The latter two categories have shown strong growth in popularity in recent years. Keep a close eye on adoption of smart phones (24%) as medical applications, social media and online collaborations become more pervasive among physicians.

Heavy internet users (10 hours and up) own more of these digital devices than lighter internet users. No surprise there. Physicians are information seekers and users so we should expect them to agree that the internet increases and enriches their clinical knowledge. In fact, more than 80% do agree. This is likely the core driver of the attraction to the internet.

So what are Canadian physicians consuming online for professional purposes?

Aside from conducting online searches, primary care physicians are accessing websites specifically designed

for them by publishers and associations such as mdpasport.com, cma.ca, cfpc.ca and medscape.com. Online CME has grown in popularity to the point where eCME is now almost on par with live CME. Although physicians continue to enjoy printed peer-reviewed medical journals, their online counterparts are reaching 81% of primary care physicians as compared to 84% for printed journals.

There's more. eNewsletters, online patient education and even eDetailing of pharmaceuticals are beginning to reshape the information landscape that physicians access. New services have been made possible by web 2.0 technologies. How does your adoption experience compare with what physicians in our sample have reported doing at least once online?

Watch medical/health videos, 64%;

Read medical/health blogs, 48%; Listen/download medical/health audio files, 31%; Order product samples, 30%; Instant message a colleague, 21%; Visit medical/health chat room/bulletin board, 21%; Participate in online physician community, 10%.

Research to be released this fall will examine ongoing changes in physician internet usage and preferences, with particular focus on the use of social media

for collaborations with other physicians and healthcare providers.

If you are interested in participating in upcoming research or have suggestions for research in physician, healthcare practitioner or patient use of the internet, please contact Don Lajoie at donl@essentialresearch.ca

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