

Physician's Weekly®

HIGHLIGHTS AND ANALYSIS OF MEDICAL NEWS

THIS WEEK'S LEAD STORY



■ **CHEVY CHASE, Md-** Healthy patients who fret over every ache and pain have been around a long time. But before cutting-edge diagnostics, high-tech drugs, and online health advice, there was little the “worried well” could do—except worry.

Not so today. With more do-it-yourself options than ever before and medical consumerism at an all-time high, patients are going to greater lengths to maintain their own health, often bypassing their doctors altogether.

“Most companies now promise you’ll get a lube job right away or french fries in 30 seconds,” says Zeev Neuwirth, MD, an internist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York who teaches classes on doctor-patient relationships. “When it crosses into health care, people expect to be seen now, treated now, and cured now.”

Experts cite a host of influences behind the growing activism-24/7 health news coverage; direct-to-consumer drug advertising; rising disillusionment with HMO cost-cutting; too-brief visits with time-crunched doctors; and the oversell of medicine’s curative capabilities.

When it comes to caring for the “worried well,” most doctors can’t justify ordering tests that aren’t indicated, but there’s no shortage of establishments that will. Centers offering full-body ultrasound scans to detect early signs of heart disease and cancer are popping up in malls and retail districts nationwide,

complete with catchy radio spots featuring testimonials from patients. Chronic health worriers seeking peace of mind are heeding the call.

The David Drew Clinic here goes a step further, catering to “worried well” patients willing to pay up to \$5,000 out-of-pocket for annual full-service physicals that reach well beyond routine mammograms and cholesterol screenings. Daylong checkups include not only full-body scans, but also genetic testing; a complete battery of blood tests, including blood markers for certain cancers; and hours of unlimited face-time with a doctor.

“Our patients are a lot more educated about their mortality than most,” notes Joe Ford, the clinic’s business development manager and patient liaison. “We’re providing more than a turn-and-cough physical. We offer reassurance and early detection. Money isn’t the main issue.”

But some doctors worry that consumers are really buying little more than false security. “People feel like they’re doing something to help themselves,” says Joseph J. Brugman, MD, a radiologist and chief of staff at Western Medical Center in Santa Ana, Calif., an area where many full-scan centers are springing up. “But most tests for most cancers don’t find them early, and finding tumors early doesn’t necessarily make you live longer. These scan centers take anybody, including young, asymptomatic patients, without consulting a patient’s primary-care physician. I don’t think that’s right.”

Even worse, unnecessary scanning may actually uncover lumps and spots that ultimately turn out to be benign, forcing patients to go through more unnecessary tests and needless worrying. “I know a woman in her thirties who went to her doctor for stomach pain,” recalls Dr. Neuwirth. “He did an ultrasound and picked up something on her liver. For the next year, she went through two CT scans, two MRIs, and a biopsy on her liver before her doctor finally determined it was a benign lesion. It should have never been found and never touched.

Few tools have given consumers more control over health

decisions than the Internet. Ever-growing numbers are logging on for everything from health tips to disease diagnoses.

A study last year by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, found that 52 million American adults-55% of those with online access-have turned to the Web for medical information and do so about once a month. Some 21 million "health seekers" said they were swayed by cyber advice: 70% reported it influenced their choice of treatment for illnesses, and 50% felt compelled to ask their doctor new questions or get a second opinion because of it.

"People are more educated; that's a good thing," says Bruce Bagley, MD, an FP in Albany, N.Y., and chair of the board of the American Academy of Family Physicians. But too much general knowledge-for instance, learning that a particular pain might signal a pinched nerve as well as any number of life-threatening maladies including a tumor or heart attack-sometimes leads to extreme health anxiety and drastic action, he adds. "Heretofore, we've been able to reassure worried patients. Now everyone wants an MRI for everything. It's almost like a Chicken Little phenomenon-the sky is falling."

Activist medical consumers aren't likely to tone down their quest for health and longevity any time soon, particularly as new "smart" technologies allow more self-care, says Ted Selker, PhD, a professor in the Health Special Interest Group of MIT's Media Lab in Cambridge, Mass.

Among the personal medical devices imagined by Dr. Selker and his colleagues: pill-size biosensors that monitor vital signs and detect disease when swallowed; a toothbrush that checks oral health; and a belt buckle that records years of physiological data, including heart rate and galvanic skin response. Plug it into a Palm Pilot and it alerts you when events in your schedule, such as meetings or time with a coworker, have proven stressful or made you sick in the past. Notes Dr. Selker, "We're all into making ourselves be what we want to be. If you know your limits, you can avoid them."-*Sidney Stevens*

