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Med blogs give professionals new way to reach out to patients

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Inside Bay Area

GRADUATING from medical school, making partner at his health center and raising a close-knit family — sometimes it's just not enough for Dr. Enoch Choi of Palo Alto.

Choi, an urgent care physician who is active in his church, sings in a gospel choir and volunteers for the Parents' Club of Palo Alto and Menlo Park, feels a need to share more of himself. It's an urge he satisfies each day by writing his own blog.

A blog may sound like jargon-y mystery word — a cross between blob and frog, maybe — but it's nothing more than a contraction of the words Web and log. (Web + log = blog. Get it?).

Blogs take many forms, including the genre Choi practices, medical blogging.

To confuse and contract the terminology further, health care workers who blog call themselves med bloggers.

Choi posts his online journal, Med Musings, at his Web site <http://www.enochchoi.com> for the daily perusal of about 50 or so friends and another 400 to 500 strangers who regularly drop by to see what's on the doctor's mind. Choi likens his blog to an opt-in e-mail service.

When visiting med blogs, it's not always clear where the doctor or health care worker is located geographically. But Bay Area bloggers seem to find each other. Choi, for instance, also contributes to a locally-grown blog called Medgadget.com. Other Bay Area-based med blogs focus on the day-to-day experiences of nurses. And a Sunnyvale-based blog, <http://www.healthvoices.com>, gathers blog entries written by sources from patients to physicians.

"I'm a diarist, a day-in-the-life kind of med blogger," Choi says. "Many others are political or policy (oriented bloggers). Others are focused on specialties (such as)

nephrology for the kidneys or others review cases. Some of them show CT scans or X-rays and talk about them."

His fans come to the Web sitewillingly, he says, so there's no need for them to feel spammed with unwanted snapshots of his kids, his mullings over the week's church service or his warnings about impending flu outbreaks.

"I typically comment on hot (medical) topics," he says. "For example, things of interest in my area, urgent care, things like medication recalls or new signs of an epidemic."

While some med bloggers tailor their messages to other physicians or health care experts, Choi keeps his postings accessible to mainstream audiences.

"I try to write so most anybody with an interest in technology or medicine can understand," he says.

Tech-obsessed health care and bio medical professionals make up the target audience of Medgadget.com, a medical technology blog run by Dr. Michael Ostrovsky, a Daly City anesthesiologist. He has help from a crew of volunteers.

Ostrovsky started Medgadget.com 11/2years ago as a place to spotlight the ever-growing crop of high-tech gizmos available to those practicing medicine.

Each day five to eight brief stories, along with commentary from Ostrovsky and his fellow bloggers, appear on the site.

"Today, we featured solar-powered retinal implants," Ostrovsky says. "We covered a game where people put on a brain wave-monitoring helmet (that makes) people relax. Remission's a popular (game, too). It's been shown clinically to improve outcomes (for young cancer patients)."

Devices recently covered also include software that allows surgeons to map out their surgery plan; a life-size pregnant robot that allows student doctors to practice delivering babies; and a credit card-sized memory stick that holds a patient's medical records.

Ostrovsky says his med blog gives readers a bigger dose of technology news than mainstream periodicals.

"Knowledge gets very fragmented and diverse, and each small Web site can cover (technology) deeper than regular newspapers," he says. "Even medical journals wouldn't want to go into stories we go into."

The reader-friendly writing style also makes it a worthwhile stop for interested lay people.

"People can learn about the latest medical technology, how electronics used everywhere from the kitchen to the iPod actually go into medical devices," Ostrovsky explains. "They can also see what inroads nanotechnology is making in medicine."

Doctors, of course, aren't the only medical professionals blogging.

A Newark-area critical care nurse, who identifies herself only as Geena, runs a site called <http://www.codeblog.com>.

Visitors to the med blog read first-hand accounts of sitting in on a friend's Caesarean section, a nightmarish experience filling in on the children's psychiatric ward and how hard it is to tell a hopeful family that their loved one is dying.

Of course, not all is serious in the land of med blogging.

At <http://www.emergiblog.com>, visitors find plenty of lighter medical moments compliments of an emergency room nurse named Kim who says she lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

One recent post, for instance, details an elderly woman who arrived after hacking her finger with a knife. In the ER, Kim carefully removed a blood-drenched bandage from the patient's finger. When the wrap was removed, Kim couldn't find a cut anywhere.

"We pried apart what looked like a break in the skin, we prodded and poked and scratched our heads in wonder," Kim writes. "We did everything except amputate the finger and send it to pathology."

In the end there was little left to do for the patient.

"We sent her home with a baggie of antibiotic ointment, Band-Aids and a few 2-by-2 (pads) in case it started bleeding again. And a magnifying

glass ..."

Strict laws about preserving patient confidentiality make it clear why some med bloggers choose to remain anonymous. Others, such as Ostrovsky, say it's to their advantage to make their identities public.

"Transparency goes a long way in giving us credibility," he says.

Credibility also ranks at the top of Choi's list of qualities found on a good med blog. Keeping it current also counts.

"Timeliness is part of why people are coming to blogs," Choi says. "And entertainment. It has to do with the way we write. (Postings) should be humorous, pithy and easily digestible to a common audience."

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