

## View from the front line: New information sources

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### *What's new on the medical Web?*

It's hard to believe, but the Internet is now a part of our everyday lives and what was a technology that only a few years back was pushing the frontiers of our knowledge, is today an everyday commodity. Take the recent experience of my computer breaking down (the hard disc died!). Being without Internet access at home, albeit for a very short time, felt like a major loss.

Internet resources are becoming more sophisticated and the current generation of services are significant improvements on the 'ground breaking' services of just a few years back. So, from the medical surfer's point of view, let me look at examples of what I think are useful, leading edge and highly productive services.

First up is **Google** <[www.google.com/](http://www.google.com/)>. Now I would suspect that all readers would be familiar with this great Internet search engine. It is as good as, if not better than, all the others. It is easy to use, very fast and often gives accurate results within the first few hits returned. I suspect many health professionals have successfully used this to answer their medical queries. One drawback is that, mixed in with the technical information, there is plenty of lay information which may be less relevant to the medical person (though still interesting in its own right).

So step forward a new Google service, **Google Scholar** <<http://scholar.google.com/>>, which 'in a nutshell' is a search engine of academic literature. When logging on to the scholar search page, most Google users will feel at home with the familiar simple search interface. Since this is a (free) Google service, naturally there is a lot of interest within the Internet community. I have used it several times and so far the results of my 'scholarly search' have been pretty good. Often the whole text of the document is not available but at least it gives you a good head start when looking for something. New users should read the help section of **Google Scholar** <<http://scholar.google.com/scholar/about.html>> and this **SearchEngineWatch** article <[\[searchenginewatch.com/searchday/article.php/3437471\]\(http://searchenginewatch.com/searchday/article.php/3437471\)>. These two resources will give you an understanding of the service, but the best way to see if it is useful is to test it out yourself.](http://</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

Of course such an event as Google Scholar will also generate something that has become a recent Web phenomenon; a blog or an online journal. Already I have found a blog about Google Scholar <<http://schoogle.blogspot.com/>>. No doubt more will spring up. I have also no doubt that the breadth of coverage and the volume of data within Google Scholar will continue to improve and grow with time.

Another manifestation of what's new in the medical Web is an implementation of an old idea – **ask an expert**. The problem is finding that expert. If you are in primary care in England, there is a new and exciting service which I hope will succeed. It is the **Primary Care Question Answering Service** <[www.clinicalanswers.nhs.uk/](http://www.clinicalanswers.nhs.uk/)> and is a service supported by the **National Library for Health** <[www.library.nhs.uk/](http://www.library.nhs.uk/)>.

It's very simple. If you work in primary care in England and have a clinical question you want answered then this is the place to come. Simply complete the 'Ask us a Question' form and bombs away you should get an answer within a few days. Of course it is of no use if the patient is in front of you and you want an immediate response. Currently, it is a pilot project and so has limited capacity. However, recently published questions and answers are available from the home page, whilst the archive is also available via the subject index at the side. There is a sister

service for primary care in Wales, **ATTRACT** <[www.attract.wales.nhs.uk/](http://www.attract.wales.nhs.uk/)>.

Now, the idea of asking a trusted resource any question related to clinical practice and receiving a customised, research-based response within a reasonable timeframe would be a great leap forward. Personally, I would like to see this service extended to the whole of the NHS family of health professionals. I hope the resources for a central facility will come soon and be widely advertised.

The third and final service I want to highlight is the use of **Webcams** and **instant messenger programmes** (*i.e.* real-time text conversations). Over a broadband Internet connection, and using an instant messenger service which can support a Webcam (for example **MSN Messenger** <<http://messenger.msn.co.uk/>>) a free-of-charge, two-way conversation can take place. By using the Webcam, the instant messaging is supplemented with video and audio. There are opportunities here for patient/health professional interaction using this medium and also for health professional to health professional interaction. Think of the benefits of interacting via a Webcam with another health professional who may be some distance away. However, I suspect that this medium is currently used only by enthusiasts. The importance of this is that there is a universally agreed standard communication protocol already widely available, whilst hardware such as the Webcam and broadband connection is relatively inexpensive.

### **How do some of these important new services gain publicity?**

It never ceases to amaze me how many powerful problem-solving services exist on the Internet and every day new ones appear. I often wish I had known about a particular service earlier. Word of mouth, reading about them on the Web and reading traditional, paper-based publications like this are certainly some of the ways of making such services better known.