

BEHIND THE MASK

Medicine Meets the Mouse

Smoke rose from marijuana. The Scythian king inhaled it, but his pain persisted. Soon this tattooed horseman of the steppes would die of prostate cancer. Dating to the time of the prophet Jeremiah, his case is the oldest known. What was it like for him? Where did he get his health information?

Herodotus writes that when Scythian kings fell ill, soothsayers were brought to advise. Usually, the soothsayers found someone to blame. Usually someone appealed. If he lost, he died. If he won, the soothsayers died in an ox-pulled cart set on fire. Soothsayers were consulted, but they were not necessarily trusted.

Where do we get health information? According to *How America Searches*, a study by iCrossing and Opinion Research Corp., we get most of it from the Internet. Still, while most of us trust doctors first, only 8 percent of us trust the Internet first. We consult it, but do not necessarily trust it.

Why? Because it overwhelms and is often irrelevant. Imagine the king at the keyboard. He searches "tired," a symptom, and receives 136 million pages of information. He reads that he should eat breakfast for it will make him perky. Disgusted, he puts the Internet to death in an ox-pulled cart set on fire.

Are we eternally condemned to the false prophecies of soothsayers and cyberspace? Not necessarily, because we are living in transformational times. New technologies allow us to share and discuss information, freed from dependence on techies; Facebook is one example. We are the Internet, and we are heading to Health 2.0.

Why? According to *The Wisdom of Patients*, a report by the California Healthcare Foundation, the merits of Health 2.0 relate to the merits of groups: "When patients managing the same chronic condition share observations with each other, their collective wisdom can yield clinical insights well beyond the understanding of any single patient or physician." In other words, we can make better decisions if we pool our information and help each other use it.

Is it ready? Is there something for everyone? No, Health 2.0 is in its infancy, as we recently found out. A few months ago, a friend and I plunged in. Using blogs, syndication and social networks similar to Facebook, we

developed the "New" Prostate Cancer InfoLink. Its resources unite doctors, patients, wives, ministers, government officials—anyone with an interest in prostate cancer.

How has it worked? Here is an example. A patient typed that he was due to have a tooth extraction. A side effect of a drug he was on is associated with rotting of the jaw. He asks if he is at risk for it. A member of the network from Philadelphia sits on the Board of the International Myeloma Foundation, whose members first described this complication. He sent information.

A member in Tucson is a former president of the American Society of Periodontists. He sent information. The patient trusted what he got because it was authoritative and unbiased by commercial interest. He liked it because it was relevant to him.

Members bring members, as if the network were an online cocktail party. They come from Canada, Chile, India and other places. Much of the discussion is about prostate cancer but not all of it. A minister is discussing faith. A Broadway producer threatens to turn the network into *Prostate, The Musical*. An Aussie outback guide explains why Queenslanders can't spell beer. The network is at once authoritative, efficient and human. If you are sick, is this not what you want?

Will Health 2.0 bring a trust in health information not available to the Scythian king? Nobody knows, but Health 2.0 suggests that the answer depends on us. To see how it works, visit the "New" Prostate Cancer InfoLink and Social Network at prostatecancerinfolink.net and prostatecancerinfolink.ning.com, where you can read *How America Searches* and *The Wisdom of Patients*.

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