Googling your patients?

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Have you ever Googled a patient? Should you? It’s a question physician blogger Kevin MD raises, and it seems like an interesting consideration in the ever-changing Internet/social media world.

Of course patients Google their physicians all the time. But how often do doctors research their patients online? Maybe there are some contexts in which that would make sense (Kevin MD notes that primary care might not be among them, but perhaps psychiatry.)

This issue comes as I am writing a story on how physicians can ensure the privacy of their patients while engaging online through social media networks. The whole “to friend or not to friend on Facebook” question seems to get some docs in a bind. Now this seems like an entirely new dimension to delving into the ether.

The Googling your patients question also reminds me of an inquiry I received from a reader after our Lawyer Repellant story.

For the story, experts told me that to help avoid lawsuits, be wary of problem patients – the ones who speak ill of their previous docs or have sued before. So the reader rightfully asked, how do you know if they have sued before? (I am not sure if this is information that is easily Googled, but I do know with a little digging it’s amazing what you can find.)

I asked Medical Justice Services’ Jeffrey Segal about that, and he said (via e-mail) that there really isn’t a practical way to know if a patient has sued a physician before. Even if you could see that they have sued before, you couldn’t tell whether any lawsuit had merit or was frivolous. Compiling that information in a database would make it hard for those patients to find care. Also, I can’t imagine digging around for that information on each patient, and if the patient relationship has pushed you to that point, perhaps it’s not a good fit.

All of this is to ask how much you can and should dig around and research a patient online? Lawsuits aside, what information would you find that is relevant to treating that patient? Kevin MD notes that the overriding question should be “Will researching my patient online improve their care?”

Disclosures:

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