

Internet a valuable resource

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Most of the orthodontists I meet use the Internet on a regular basis to check stock prices, make vacation plans and restaurant reservations, as well as for a great many other purposes. But as surprising as it may seem, most do not use the net to solve specific clinical problems. They still spend the majority of their time in the office diagnosing and treating orthodontic problems; it is interesting to me that they don't look to the Internet for more help. Is it because we have grown comfortable treating patients? Have we collectively accumulated so many years of experience that we feel in control 95% of the time? Or is it because we don't know how much help is out there?

I know that I once thought I could finesse most of the unusual questions that came my way. I recently changed my mind. After examining an 8-year-old girl, I greeted her mother and was confronted with a request I had never before heard: "I have been referred by our dentist, and I know that my daughter is in need of your services," noted the mother, "but she has myasthenia gravis, and I want to know if this is a contraindication to the successful completion of her orthodontic care?"

I didn't know the answer to this question. A few years ago I might have launched into a more familiar discourse related to the characteristics of her malocclusion. But I didn't do that. Instead, I listened to the mother's concern, then promised to call her the next day. That evening I used the

newly published (free) web site for the National Library of Medicine (>ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed<). I learned that myasthenia gravis is an autoimmune disorder characterized by weakness in the muscles, most often the muscles that cause swallowing. Major impairment is rare and most patients are able to live normal lives.

With little effort, I learned enough about this condition to discuss it with the child's mother the next day. She was most appreciative, and even indicated that she would use the same web site to get more detailed information. She was eventually able to get connected with a couple of very helpful organizations that provided her with information about the side effects of medications, etc.

From that moment on this parent has been an enthusiastic supporter of our office and was ready to go ahead with her daughter's orthodontic treatment without further hesitation. Since that exam I have been confronted by parents asking about incontinentia pigmenti and Williams Syndrome. Again and again, I have found it convenient to look to the net for answers.

I don't want to spoil a happy ending, but I'm worried now that with public access to the National Library of Medicine, my next exam may well have already looked up all of the information! I can see patients coming into the office loaded with data...and an examination of my intelligence.

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