

Wiki health site aims to provide sound medical information

March 1 2009, By Hadley Leggett

With four children under the age of 5, James Currier had lots of questions about sniffles, rashes and fevers. One late night, while holding a sick child in his lap, he tried searching for answers online.

"I was shocked," Currier said. "I couldn't find anything easy to read, explanatory and credible, that wasn't covered with pharmaceutical ads or Botox commercials."

Currier didn't know much about medicine, but he knew a lot about the Internet. So he has launched Medpedia (www.medpedia.com), a wiki-style health site where the information is written only by those boasting M.D.s or Ph.D.s - instead of just anyone with an opinion and idle time.

It's certainly not the first attempt to create a comprehensive health site. The Internet is crowded with a mind-boggling array of health information - not all of it sound - on everything from how to manage diabetes to how to lose 20 pounds in 10 days. To distinguish itself, Medpedia has recruited doctors from heavyweight medical schools like Stanford and Harvard and from the National Institutes of Health to contribute content.

The company hopes the free site will give people reliable medical information, while offering doctors a chance to network with each other.

"Medical information is one of the last big areas that hasn't been touched or transformed by Internet technology," said Currier, founder of the San

Francisco company Ooga Labs, which is funding the Medpedia Project. "But it's one of the ones that could be most transformed."

Medpedia's supporters hope expert-only editing will ensure accurate content. But restricting the site to experts will also limit the number of people who can contribute, and it may slow the site's growth.

"That's the key question," said Dr. John Swartzberg, professor of public health at the University of California-Berkeley and a volunteer adviser for Medpedia. "Will physicians and Ph.D.s spend their time vetting this material?"

To encourage them to add content, Medpedia offers networking for health professionals and organizations, and gives credit to experts who contribute to the site. Some supporters say they were also drawn to the site's collaborative format.

"We were quite taken with the idea that this would be a kind of open system," said Dr. Henry Lowe, senior associate dean for information resources and technology at Stanford University School of Medicine. "All the information in Medpedia would be high quality, reliable, up-to-date and obtained by experts - and it would be made available to the world at-large, free and unrestricted."

Although more than 110 organizations have contributed or pledged to contribute content since the project was announced in July, the site is still in its infancy. Users can create a profile and sign up to get updates on topics that interest them, but for now, Medpedia doesn't offer enough content to compete with more established health sites like WebMD or Health Central.

Consumers say they'd like a site with health information they can trust. As San Jose resident Larry Laundrie discovered, there's a lot of

confusion on the Internet.

A relative had shingles and the family was trying to decide if it was safe to visit.

"I found conflicting views of whether it's contagious or if it gives you chickenpox," Laundrie said. Half the sites told him the virus was highly contagious, while the other half said it wasn't.

If Medpedia had been around, Laundrie could have found the right answer: Shingles is caused by reactivation of the chickenpox virus, so you can't catch shingles or give it to others. But you could potentially spread the chickenpox virus to someone who's never been exposed to it - which is why Medpedia cautions anyone with a shingles outbreak to stay away from young children, pregnant women or people with a weakened immune system.

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