

## Medical blogs get ethics treatment

Sites more careful about privacy issues

June 11, 2007

BY MARGARITA BAUZA

FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

The medical blogosphere -- the modern equivalent of a doctors lounge -- is experiencing growing pains.

Gone are the musings of, among others, Dr. Flea and Barbados Butterfly -- popular doctors who wrote anonymously about their medical practices on blogs for the world to read on the Internet.

Neonataldoc, featured in a March 20 Free Press report in which observers posed questions about blogging and patient confidentiality, temporarily shut down his blog after the report ran, saying things had become "too weird."

The story set off a debate in the medical blogging community concerning patient privacy and whether such tell-all blogs should be policed.

Bloggers who have stopped say they have done so at the request of employers who fear litigation or because they were worried about getting in trouble. Others have shut down under more serious circumstances.

More than a week ago, Robert P. Lindeman, a Boston pediatrician, was identified during his own medical malpractice trial as a blogger who goes by the name Dr. Flea.

Lindeman had been blogging about his trial as it progressed -- ridiculing attorneys and jurors and revealing his defense strategy.

After the plaintiff's attorney outed him, the trial ended, his attorney asked him to shut down his blog and Lindeman agreed to settle, according to news media reports in Boston.

The case, once again, set off debate about the dangers of medical blogging. Web sites like KevinMD, run by internal medicine doctor Kevin Pho, discussed whether such cases would kill the medical blogosphere.

"Grim news pervades the medical blogosphere today," Pho wrote in a May 16 entry, where he listed blogs that had vanished.

He is more upbeat today.

"I think that the recent issues pertaining to employers shutting down blogs and the Flea situation are part of the normal growing process of blogs," said Pho, who uses his name on his blog and who decided early on that he would never write about his patients.

"It has made physicians more careful about what they blog about," he added. "Because this is a new phenomenon, physicians and medical institutions are trying to find a balance of what is acceptable to blog or not."

The incidents have inspired efforts to create standards.

The author of medblogcode.blogspot.com composed, with the help of other doctors, a medical blogger code of ethics. The code covers issues pertaining to confidentiality, privacy and commercial disclosure.

"I think doctors who are blogging are going to be a lot more careful about what they write before they send it out to the world to see," said Dr. Hsien Hsien Lei, a geneticist who was one of the first medical bloggers to offer guidelines on ethics.

Starting six to eight years ago with a handful of physicians offering perspectives on medical news, the medical blogosphere now counts between 500 and 1,000 blogs.

Their subjects range from scientific developments to comical observations on patient-doctor relationships, to a place where doctors -- protected by the cloak of anonymity -- feel free to vent about their practices.

Supporters say medical blogs provide an immediate way to get information to the masses about medicine that bypasses the traditional and slow publication of journals.

Some bloggers who shut down have reemerged.

The cantankerous neonatologist who authors [www.neonataldoc.blogspot.com](http://www.neonataldoc.blogspot.com) and documents his practice with frank and sometimes disparaging observations on the teen moms he encounters, recently returned to the Web with his trademark harsh tone.

"When the bearded lady walked into the NICU, I knew it was time to start blogging again," he wrote May 27. "For some reason, I've seen a lot of facial hair on women the past few years, and it's usually just a moustache or some on the chin, often like sort of a bad goatee. ... Not so here; this woman was unfortunate enough to have a macho five o'clock shadow."

Said Pho, "The ground rules are still being written. Over the next couple of years, once people are more aware of the phenomenon, it's going to become more mainstream. I think there's tremendous interest in how medicine is run."

Contact **MARGARITA BAUZA** at 313-222-6823 or [mbauza@freepress.com](mailto:mbauza@freepress.com).

**Copyright © 2007 Detroit Free Press Inc.**