The Use of Email by Physician Breastfeeding Experts for the Support of the Breastfeeding Mother

Jennifer R. Thomas, MD, IBCLC, FAAP, FABM
Breastfeeding

- An important health priority \[^{18,21}\]
- Support for the breastfeeding mother is crucial to her success \[^{6,7}\]
- This support should be timely and reassuring, especially when breastfeeding becomes difficult \[^{1}\]
Importance of Physicians

- Breastfeeding initiation and duration rates increase because of physician encouragement [1-3]
- Many physicians have no or little education about breastfeeding [4]
- Many physicians do not have a supportive attitude towards breastfeeding [4,9,10]
Importance of the Internet

- Tool for those seeking health information
- 80% of internet users searched for information on health [11]
- 19% searched for information on pregnancy and childbirth [11]
Importance of the Internet

- Search engine keywords lead to physicians who have commented on a particular health issue \(^{[15]}\)
- These physicians can be seen by internet users as experts and contacted by those looking for information. \(^{[16]}\)
Reasons Physicians Don’t Use Email\cite{13,14}

- Privacy
- Malpractice liability
- Time
- Reimbursement issues
- Ethical issues

But, email communication could eliminate some perceived and real access barriers to care.
Unsolicited Emails

• Communication from a patient with whom the physician has no previous relationship
• Suggests that patients feel they are not receiving relevant information [16,17]
• Represents a growing frustration with care [5]
• Marker for frustration with current support
Our Survey

- Designed to look at physician use of email for breastfeeding support
- Assessed how often physician experts in breastfeeding are contacted as a marker for frustration with current support [16]
- Also addressed physician attitudes to these requests
Methods

- Emailed survey of members of the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine (ABM) and the members of the American Academy of Pediatrics-Section on Breastfeeding (SOBr)
- These organizations represent a large cohort of physicians with an expertise in breastfeeding
- Survey sent to the listserv of each organization
Methods: Information Collected

- Demographic Data
- Years working with breastfeeding mother/baby pairs
- Practice setting
- Additional credentials:
  - International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC)- experts in breastfeeding care [18]
  - Fellow of the ABM (FABM): special recognition for expertise from the ABM [19]
  - Certified Lactation Educator (CLE)
Methods: Information Collected

- Current use of email
- Challenges
- Successes
- Concerns

- Attitudes about communication with patients, established or previously unknown

Questions concerning unsolicited emails were modeled after Eysenbach, with the author's permission.[20]
## Results

### Demographics of Survey Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>No. (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean (SE)</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>210 (77.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60 (22.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community in which majority of patients live</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>41 (15.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>94 (34.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban, not inner-city</td>
<td>72 (26.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban inner-city</td>
<td>63 (23.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Demographics of Survey Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice characteristic</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>199 (55.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not academic</td>
<td>151 (44.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Breastfeeding Certification</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IBCLC (International Board Certified Lactation Consultant)</td>
<td>45 (16.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLE (Certified Lactation Educator)</td>
<td>4 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow of the ABM</td>
<td>33 (12.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Demographics of Survey Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary specialty</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General pediatrics</td>
<td>233 (87.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Medicine</td>
<td>11 (4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstetrics and gynecology</td>
<td>4 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Medicine</td>
<td>4 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventive Medicine/Public Health</td>
<td>14 (5.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>14 (5.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subspecialty</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>212 (79.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neonatology</td>
<td>30 (11.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>25 (9.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Current practices

- Use of email was not related to:
  - age ($p = 0.217$)
  - year of graduation from medical school ($p = 0.290$)
  - gender ($p = 0.947$),
  - geographic location ($p = 0.263$)
  - length of time the physician had worked with breastfeeding dyads ($p = 0.378$)

- Use of email was related to practice setting.
  - Those in academic practices were more likely to email patients than those in non-academic settings ($p = 0.009$)
### Attitude of Survey Respondents Towards Internet Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>No. (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How appropriate is it for patients to seek medical advice by email from doctors with whom they do not have an existing doctor-patient relationship? (n=261)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very inappropriate</td>
<td>72 (27.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat inappropriate</td>
<td>101 (38.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither inappropriate or appropriate</td>
<td>42 (16.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat appropriate</td>
<td>37 (14.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Appropriate</td>
<td>9 (3.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Attitude of Survey Respondents Towards Internet Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How appropriate is it for a physician to give medical advice over the Internet via email? (n=261)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very inappropriate</td>
<td>23 (8.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat inappropriate</td>
<td>63 (24.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither inappropriate or appropriate</td>
<td>59 (22.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat appropriate</td>
<td>91 (34.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Appropriate</td>
<td>25 (9.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results: Current Practices

- Reasons for non-participation in email
  - Time
  - The ability of patients to understand what is appropriate over email
  - Privacy, legal, ethical, and information quality issues
  - Lack of interest
Results: Current Practices

- 25% of respondents received email from patients with whom they had no previous relationship.
- When faced with an unsolicited email, 62% said they answered it.
- No respondent billed or collected fees for any email services
## Attitude of Survey Respondents Towards Internet Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think that unsolicited emails from patients sent to doctors asking for medical advice represents a significant unresolved problem on the Internet? (n=259)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>130 (50.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>47 (18.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>82 (31.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

• Many breastfeeding mothers are contacting breastfeeding experts to get help.
• Some of these contacts are made between a mother and physician with whom no prior relationship exists.
• Unsolicited emails
  • Have been described as "cries for help" [16]
  • Marker of frustration and dissatisfaction
Discussion

• Our physician respondents felt very strongly about being contacted
  • over half felt that it was “very” or “somewhat inappropriate” for patients to email physicians with whom they have no prior relationship
  • half felt that these types of emails were a significant unresolved problem.
Limitations with Web-based Survey

- Getting a representative sample \([22,23]\)
  - In summer 2007, when this survey was administered, the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine had 46 fellows, 33 (72\%) of whom responded.
  - A significant portion of the most recognized experts were represented in our survey.
- Response bias \([22,23]\)
  - Our response rates were about the same as surveys designed similarly to ours. \([24,25]\)
Conclusions

- Despite concerns about privacy, legal, and time constraints and concerns regarding inappropriate use, over half of the respondents contacted replied to emails individually and without reimbursement.

- This may indicate that the experts themselves recognize they are a resource of last resort, but feel strongly about their obligation to support mothers.
Conclusions

- A few physician experts cannot possibly meet the increasing demand for reliable breastfeeding information.
- The creation of more physician experts in breastfeeding is needed to meet the increasing demand for breastfeeding support.
Conclusions

- Future efforts should focus on
  - Provider education and encouragement of breastfeeding
  - Alternate resources and strategies for physicians
  - Access by breastfeeding mothers to timely, expert and accurate information and a continuity of support.
THANKS FOR LETTING US EMAIL YOU!!

YOU’RE THE BEST
References


References


References

14. Fox, S., Fallows, D, *Internet Health Resources. Health Searches and email have become more commonplace, but there is room for improvement in searches and overall internet access*. 2003, Pew Internet & American Life Project:


References


