Loyola explores different prostate cancer websites for meaningful medical information

November 17, 2012

Prostate cancer, like many medical conditions, varies in presentation, treatment options, and outcomes. Undeniably, patients rely on the Internet for early education about their prostate cancer diagnosis or to fill information gaps from doctors. We use the Internet to research nearly every facet of our lives, and our physical wellbeing is no exception. But can we trust what we read? Better yet, can we understand it?

For world-renowned robotic prostate cancer surgeon, David Samadi, MD, the disease he treats – prostate cancer – and his technique are not simple. His global "treat and teach" philosophy centers on the most advanced prostate cancer treatment available, supported by thorough patient education. As such, he has two websites, www.roboticoncology.com and www.smartsurgery.com, that provide an overview of the disease, the full range of treatment options, and his own SMART (Samadi Modified Advanced Robotic Technique) surgery.

"Thorough and accurate patient education is vital," Dr. Samadi says. "I'm a robotic surgeon, but it's important for my patients to understand all options. I work to maintain websites that are clear and up-to-date so when patients leave my office – or before they even arrive – they have solid resources they can understand and depend on."

We're often reminded to choose wisely when it comes to digging for medical information online. According to a Loyola University Medical Center study, however, it isn't just about being a savvy surfer. In some cases, you may need a medical degree to know what you're ready.

Who's Online?

An Internet study by Pew Research Center suggests that most men of prostate cancer age are online and are looking for health information. Eighty-five percent of adults age 50-64 use the Internet, plus 58 percent of those over 65. Among them, 80 percent are gathering health and medical information.

How Prostate Cancer Websites Stack Up

Loyola University Medical Center explored 62 different prostate cancer websites, finding that most are written above a 12th-grade reading level. Since one-third of Americans read below a high-school level, that presents a significant patient wellness challenge. As a general guideline, the U.S. National Institutes of Health suggest a fourth- to sixth-grade reading level for patient education materials, though few seem to heed that advice. Striking a balance between medical expertise and patient-speak online presents a significant challenge for doctors. "In person, patients can ask questions and even when they don't we can read the uncertainly on their faces and know that further clarification is needed," says Dr.
Samadi. "Whether in person or online, we have a responsibility to put ourselves in the patient's shoes and educate them in meaningful ways."

As a general rule, patients should seek health information from trusted sources such as large hospitals and experienced physicians and surgeons. Look for recommendations and advice backed by current medical research and well-recognized centers of excellence. "Patients should be as discerning online as they would be in person," urges Dr. Samadi. "Some websites are very useful, but if patients are unsure about something they read or feel they need more clarification, there's no substitute for the personal counsel of a specialist."

Dr. Samadi works to share prostate cancer information that's meaningful and useful to patients and their families. His primary site, www.roboticoncology.com, is even translated into six additional languages, including Hebrew.