

Doctors googling patients: a discussion.

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Contact Information.

- **For questions to me: james.reich@ucsf.edu**
- **I have no conflicts related to these presentations.**

The facts on the ground.

- **Although data is not methodologically strong:**
- **44.5% of patients google therapists.**
- **9% of medical students google patients.**
- **53.4% of psychiatrists have googled patients.**

So the question is not whether this is happening but how to deal with it.

How to approach the issue (1).

- **The only acceptable rationale to google a patient is the best interest of the patient or preventing harm to others.**

How to approach the issue (2).

- **Ask yourself:**
- **Why do I want to do this?**
 - Is it for my benefit or curiosity or the patients benefit.
- **What would be the practical effect of doing this:**
 - Would it change treatment?

How to approach the issue (3).

- **What would be the benefits to the patient?**
 - Would this improve my diagnosis?
 - Would it improve my treatment approach?
 - Would it uncover important treatment areas?
- **What harms might there be for the patient?**
 - Premature raising of issues the patient is not ready to discuss?
 - Privacy violations harming alliance?
 - Tilting the treatment from issues that the patient wishes to focus on?

How to approach the issue (4).

- **Reasons to google:**
 - **Facilitating the therapeutic process.**
 - **Improving the diagnosis.**
 - **Mitigating risks.**

How to approach the issue (5).

- **Reasons not to google:**
 - **Impairment of the therapeutic relationship.**
 - **Unethical invasion of privacy.**

Other aspects to consider (6).

- **Other aspects to consider.**
- **Should I get informed consent prior to the search?**
- **Should I share the results of the search with the patient?**
- **Should I document the findings of the search in the medical record?**

Conclusions (1).

- **Googling a patient is common and likely to grow more common.**
- **It is an act with potential risks and benefits.**
- **It should be evaluated on a case by case basis as an ethical decision.**

Conclusions (2).

- **Thank you for your attention.**