



CyberSearch

QUICK CLICKS TO ANSWER CLINICAL QUESTIONS

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After a day away from my practice, I am reviewing the charts of patients seen the day before by my resident. A note attached to one of the charts reads as follows.

Mrs B. brought her 2-year-old in with a cold. She mentioned an episode of “60 Minutes” she had seen on television last weekend that indicated there was a relationship between measles vaccine and autism. She is worried about her 10-month-old who is due for his measles shot in January. What should I tell her?

Mrs B. certainly is not the first patient who has picked up a suspicion about vaccines from a non-scientific source. I would have expected better from “60 Minutes,” though. I headed to the Internet to see what was going on.

First strategy

My favorite website when I am beginning a general search on something I have never heard of is www.google.com. I have set Google as my home page on every computer I use. Its results are consistently much more reliable than any other site. If you open up Google’s website, you can find out more about the “Page rank” logic it uses to achieve such relevance and consistency.

Into Google, I type “MMR autism,” and 0.09 seconds later a page of hits comes up. I next look at the URLs* listed in green below the brief descriptions of the site. Such a list can often give a really good idea of a site’s reliability.

I see www.cdc.gov in the URL of the second site listed. Centres for Disease Control sounds reliable. I click and find a great page summarizing the evidence on any association of measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine with autism, links to patient information, commonly asked questions—everything I could possibly want.

If the question had come up when Mrs B. was in the room with me and I had Internet access, I could have provided effective, credible, up-to-date reassurance for her. With a printer, I could even have run off the question-and-answer page for her to take back to her husband. All this would have taken less than 60 seconds.

Bonus experiment

I tried the same search using several other engines. My strategy for this was to type “search engines” into Google. The second site listed said “Over 100 search engines and directories.” I was then taken to <http://cui.unige.ch/meta-index.html>, which is a fun page to fool around on. By entering “MMR autism” directly into different engines, I could easily compare the Google results with those of other engines. Try it. You will be hooked on Google. ❖

* URL—uniform resource locator. Every page on the Internet is uniquely identified by a series of names, letters, and numbers known as the URL. On an address, the information after “www” and before the first forward slash (/) tells you the “homepage” and therefore the originating site for the page you are reading.

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