IN THE NEWS

Spinal Cord Impairment And Weight Loss

UAB has developed a weight management program for overweight individuals with spinal cord injury or disease (SCI/D), who often have limited physical abilities and unique nutritional needs. “For example, low-carb/high-protein diets can cause kidney problems, and improper exercise techniques can cause chronic pain,” Yuying Chen, MD, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine, says.

In response, the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation is collaborating with the Department of Nutrition Sciences to create the EatRight® Home-based Weight Management Program for individuals with spinal cord impairments.

continued on page 4

A Better Way To Talk To Patients?

BENEFITS AND BARRIERS OF E-COMMUNICATION

Last year, an estimated 70 million Americans logged on to the Internet daily, and more than half used the Web as a health information resource, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reports. Although more Americans are online than ever before, e-mail communication between physicians and patients is still uncommon. In a national survey published in the Journal of the

continued on page 2

Marketing The UAB Health System — 2005

RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Behavior and decision-making patterns of average health-care consumers have evolved over the past years. Consumers now have more Internet access to health information and have become more proactive in making health-care decisions. “In fact, we now know a group of highly engaged health-care consumers influences those around them,” Debbie Hunter-Snow, director of UAB Health System (UABHS) Marketing Communications, says. “Creating an ongoing dialogue with these consumers is the goal of the relationship-marketing wing of marketing communications.”

Four programs are under way that provide consumers with specific information about services of interest to them. eHealth magazine is available for those interested in general information about

continued on page 4

SNAPSHOTS

TOPICS OF INTEREST TO UABHS RELATIONSHIP-MARKETING CONSUMERS

- Weight Management 12%
- Allergies 6%
- Alzheimer’s Disease 4%
- Arthritis 7%
- Blood Pressure 8%
- Cancer 7%
- Diabetes 7%
- Heart Disease 13%
- Headache 5%
- Incontinence 3%
- Menopause 5%
- Men’s Health 4%
- Osteoporosis 5%
- Stroke 3%
- Other 2%
- Women’s Services 9%
American Medical Association, only 6% of respondents had used e-mail to contact their physicians (2003;289:2400-2406).

Despite current low numbers, physician-patient e-mail appeals to many Internet-savvy patients, says UAB Assistant Professor of Medicine Thomas Houston II, MD, who recently conducted a study detailing experiences of physicians and patients who were early adopters of the practice.

Physicians participating in the study found e-mail most valuable for patients with chronic disease (J Med Internet Res. 2003;5[2]:e9). “Most physicians surveyed felt e-mail improved continuity of care. For example, patients with diabetes have numerous nonurgent issues, such as laboratory results, appointment scheduling, and prescription refills, that can be effectively handled through e-mail,” Dr. Houston says.

In addition, physicians found e-mail useful for distributing educational materials, receiving preliminary information, such as medical histories and lists of current medications, and answering follow-up questions.

Patients noted benefits of e-communication, as well. “Ninety-five percent said e-mail was more efficient than the telephone for communicating with their physician. E-mail’s asynchronous nature eliminates ‘phone tag’ frustration and creates a written record,” he says.

Patients also reported they often felt more comfortable asking certain questions through e-mail instead of face-to-face. About 40% of those surveyed said they would be willing to pay a fee for a physician-patient e-mail service (Am J Manag Care. 2004;10:601-608).

“Our study suggests e-mail could increase satisfaction with patient care. E-communication could also potentially cut down on office visits and improve workflow,” Dr. Houston says.

**BARRIERS**

Although e-mail could enhance physician-patient communication, many barriers to widespread implementation remain: availability of secure electronic systems, educating patients about appropriate use of e-mail, and reimbursement.

“Most e-mail is not secure,” Dr. Houston says. “It travels through a number of networks before reaching its destination and can be intercepted by many individuals. If patients communicate through their work e-mail, their employer can access that e-mail. Many patients may not be aware that personal medical information can be so readily exposed.”

A few large health-care providers, such as the Massachusetts Partner’s HealthCare System, now provide a secure communications link as part of their patient portal, he says. “In the absence of such a system, physicians who want to e-mail patients should inform them that e-mail is not secure and get consent.”

Linda Mittleman, director of UAB’s Office of Risk Management and Insurance, agrees. “Patients need to be warned of e-mail’s privacy limitations, and physicians need to remember e-mail creates a permanent, legally admissible record. Physicians should retain copies of all e-mails, sent or received, in the patient’s medical record. In addition, physicians should not base professional advice on any less information than if the patient were seen in an office setting — in fact, the best reply may be to ask patients to make an appointment.”

Daniel Sands, MD, MPH, a Harvard physician who has been studying what he terms “electronic patient-centered communication” since 1992, prints e-mail guidelines for patients on the back of his business cards and maintains an extensive site dedicated to educating physicians, patients, and others about benefits, risks, and appropriate use of e-mail. Visit informatics.caregroup.harvard.edu/dsands/ and click on “electronic patient-centered communication.”

Such guidelines are important, Dr. Houston says. “Our study found 21% of patients used e-mail inappropriately, electronically reporting urgent issues, such as chest pain and suicidal thoughts. Guidelines should not only detail privacy risks, but explain which topics are appropriate for e-mail and establish a turnaround time for replies.”

“E-mail is never an acceptable means of communicating in an emergency or time-sensitive situation,” Mittleman stresses. “Patients need to understand that if they do not receive a response, they must try another avenue of communication.”

In 2000, the American Medical Association (AMA) established guidelines to aid physicians who e-mail with their patients. Crucial issues, including appropriate use, privacy, record keeping, and tone are addressed. For a complete list of AMA guidelines, visit www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/2386.html.

Reimbursement for e-mail remains extremely limited, Dr. Houston says. “We need more research that shows evidence of benefit to help physicians, providers, and patients make informed decisions about risks and benefits of e-communication. E-mail may be a valuable tool for improving physician-patient communication, but until systemwide protocols are in place, physicians should exercise caution before beginning electronic relationships with patients.”

CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL NURSES

Synopsis salutes all nursing staff at University Hospital and The Kirklin Clinic. National Nurses’ Week

May 2-6
“Increased frequency of HLA B44, B8, DR17(3), and DR7 in recurrent sinopulmonary infections”

**SAMUEL B. BARKER AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH BY A GRADUATE STUDENT**

Awardee: Thomas Hock, Nephrology, Mentor: Anupam Agarwal, MD

“In vivo architecture and regulation of the human heme oxygenase-1 gene in renal epithelial cells”

Semifinalist: Debeshi Majumdar, Cardiovascular Disease, Mentor: Louis J. Dell'Italia, MD

“Volume overload induces an anti-fibrotic interstitial milieu and cardiac fibroblast phenotype in rat hearts”

**JOSEPH REEVES AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH BY A POST-DOCTORAL SCHOLAR**

Awardee: Yue Wang, PhD, Clinical Immunology & Rheumatology; Mentor: Robert Carter, MD

“B Cell maturation and proliferation in the FDC zone of germinal center depends on CD19 signaling”

Semifinalist: Monique Pratt- Ubunama, MD, Cardiovascular Disease/Vascular Biology & Hypertension Program, Mentor: David Calhoun, MD

“Sleep apnea and hyperaldosteronism in patients with resistant hypertension”

**THOMAS N. JAMES AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH BY A RESIDENT**

Awardee: Neeraj Mehta, MD, Cardiovascular Disease, Mentor: Suzanne Oparil, MD

“Blocking of profibrogenic factor transforming growth factor-b blunted the pressure overload-induced cardiac interstitial fibrosis and remodeling”

Semifinalist: Sidney Barritt IV, MD, Gastroenterology & Hepatology, Mentor: Miguel Arguedas, MD

“Practice patterns in screening for varices: A national survey”

**LCME**

Read about the School of Medicine’s preparation for the March 5-6, 2006, accreditation review and visit by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME). The purpose of the LCME accreditation process is to certify the school’s educational programs meet prescriptive standards and to promote institutional self-evaluation and improvement. LCME review is organized around five areas:

- Institutional setting
- Educational program for the MD degree
- Medical students
- Faculty
- Educational resources

The site contains five self-study committees, involving more than 100 faculty, staff, and students from the school’s three campuses, that will prepare a Self-study Summary Report for submission in December. It also features databases (restricted to University access) that offer a snapshot of the school’s current situation, which the self-study committees will use to review programs. Medical Dean Robert Rich, MD, comments on the opening page that preparation for the LCME visit, running concurrently with the school’s overall strategic planning process, will serve as the “education section” of the strategic plan.

main.uab.edu/ucasom/2/show.asp?durki=76394

To access a Synopsis article from the last 2 years, visit our Web site at www.health.uab.edu/synopsis. You can search by date or subject in the left sidebar.

UAB physicians: visit MSI, the password-protected Medical Staff intranet site, at https://horizon.hs.uab.edu.
Spinal Cord Impairment And Weight Loss
continued from page 1

originally developed at UAB in 1976 for
the general population. In a 4-year study
funded by the National Institute on Dis-
bility and Rehabilitation Research, the
unique program was shown to be safe and effective at helping reduce medical
risks and improving quality of life for
persons with SCI.

Go to www.spinalcord.uab.edu and
click on “What’s New?” to order the SCI
program. Visit www.pn-magazine.com
for the “Weight Matters” column. Go to
www.uab.edu/eatright for information on
UAB’s EatRight program.

Marketing The UAB Health System 2005
continued from page 1

the UABHS. New arrivals in the Birm-
ingham area receive complimentary is-
sues and can opt for an annual subscrip-
tion. Readership surveys also help the
magazine’s editor develop articles of in-
terest for subscribers.

Special affinity programs focusing on
cardiovascular health through Heart An-
swers, cancer through Cancer Answers,
and women’s topics through Genera-
tions are also available. These programs
provide an opportunity to spotlight niche services unique to UAB. Information
about these programs is targeted to
prospects most likely to need them.

“Highly targeted customized com-
munication tactics allow us to build a
prospect database based on consumers’
individual needs,” Deeana Crider, mar-
keting manager in charge of the relation-
ship-marketing program, says. “All four
programs are attracting those who have
not been patients here,” Hunter-Snow
adds.

Each program is integrated into
overall marketing activities managed
by the department. Members are offered
monthly e-newsletters and notification
of special UABHS events. “Information
provided by members allows us to send
them news about events and services of
special interest. We currently host a data-
base of more than 110,000 people who
have requested specific information
about our services,” Hunter-Snow says.

For more information on UABHS re-
lationship-marketing projects or to share
a new program or service, contact Crider
at 934-9214 or dcrider@uabmc.edu.