

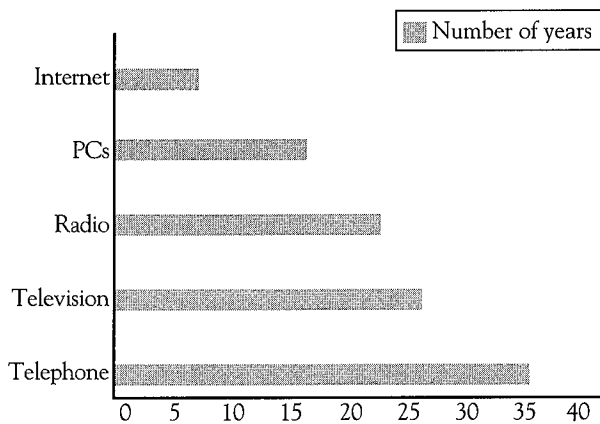
# Hot Wired

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The article by Dr. McKenna focuses attention on a rapidly growing segment of the healthcare industry — namely, the internet. The graph below shows how rapidly some inventions have taken to reach 25% of U.S. households.

The internet is currently heavily entwined in our daily activities. Practitioners cannot afford to ignore this form of communication and must look at incorporating it into their normal professional routines. The products and processes of information are at the heart of what every clinician offers their patients; it is information coupled with our therapies that serve as anchors in the value equation for all our clinical interactions. Information and communication are building blocks for successful practices. They compliment the practitioner's training, experience and clinical knowledge base. Therefore, the internet, like the telephone or a letter, becomes an important tool in dealing with our patients and other customers.

Number of Years Taken for Intervention to Reach 25% of U.S. Households



Source: Federal Reserve, 2000

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I do not feel the implications of this new tool are being missed by many practitioners. Rather, I believe the question more appropriately becomes: when will this tool evolve to be a value to the physician/user in terms of time saved, cost efficiencies and improved quality of life? The story, at this moment in time, has been more compelling for the patient than for the practitioner, and perhaps that is cause enough to push strongly for its endorsement.

Cognizant of the fact that health care is one of the largest industries in the United States with over a half a million physicians, more than 5,000 hospitals, and thousands of other healthcare personnel, we can't help but acknowledge that technology will be part of the solution to our business strategies in the future. I take umbrage with the suggestion that physicians will not make needed shifts in resource allocation to acquire technology for their practices. They will when those technologies become valuable tools — and we are closer than we have ever been. Who can argue about the enormous benefits of enhanced patient information and reliable data to guide decisions or information concerning drug interactions, etc.? The list of benefits is long and worthy, but not without challenge. At this moment in time, there are many barriers to making the internet as valuable a tool as the phone, such as the cumbersome methods of interacting with the internet connections, the concern over reliability of information and of the hardware/software, and the necessity for extreme confidentiality in patient-care-related matters — none of which is insurmountable or a long way off from being corrected.

A practice's finances and people are a proxy for its value. I would go further and state that the manner in which the practice is doing business is ultimately the arbiter of long-term success. The methods by which the practice "does business" includes the processing and dissemination of information, the implementation of its strategies, and the development of strong leadership and its business systems. Practices perform these items with varying degrees of success; in the course of a year any may see numerous oscillations in its practice metrics. Therefore, who has time for those with pretense to knowledge no one has, or a desire to listen

to would-be gurus? However, I'm confident in saying that every successful practice needs and will have an internet strategy which, with time, may encompass some or all of the following:

- Electronic charting: Many programs are becoming available. However, no perfect EMR (Electronic Medical Record) exists at this time;
- Coding and billing modules;
- Access to managed care information;
- Prescription writing;
- Appointment scheduling;
- Subspecialty information and information concerning outcomes.

At this juncture, make sure you understand where these items fit in your practice. Some components have not evolved adequately to afford a saving of time or an improvement over your current processes. The following are suggestions to follow before committing to any particular software program or Application Service Provider (ASP):

- Assess the features. Make sure you and a user member of your staff understand the product in great depth.
- What does the product offer? How does it enhance the capabilities of your practice?
- Ask to see a demonstration. Don't be hesitant to talk directly with the users of the program.
- Check data storage options. Information and the type of information you are storing become key

components of your practice. Make sure that you do not lose track of these data.

- Assess the backup and methodologies for changing software if necessary. Depending on the nature of the application, some of these programs will anchor your practice and be very difficult to change if you have made the wrong decision. Vendors appreciate this and are only too happy to sell you an application cognizant of such.
- Get legal help. Have a lawyer review the contract and warranties prior to entering into a long-term arrangement. In particular, pay attention to "hold harmless clauses," which have bearing on your liability.

The use of information in a practice is heavily entwined with the scientific foundations of the business. Art and science, when working in unison, provide a standardization of care that the patient craves. The challenge for the practitioner is to understand the implications of the technology as it currently exists and embed that within the practice to provide value to our patients on a daily basis. That's great science. That's great art.

*If you hear a voice within you saying, "You are not a painter," then by all means paint...and that voice will be silenced.*

— Vincent VanGogh