

**Internet Usage Among
Medical Doctors In Malaysia**

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, there were 20,000 Internet subscribers in 1996, 1.5 Million in 2000 and it is predicted to reach 4.5 Million in 2004. Malaysia is experiencing an explosive growth of Internet users. There is also a growing importance of "e – health businesses" as shown in the existing 20,000 healthcare sites currently online with an additional 1,500 sites being added every month. This translates to increasing healthcare site users for instance in America alone, out of 110 million Internet users, 70 million searched the Web for health information. For healthcare consumers worldwide, the Internet has now become a tool for health information empowerment. This brings us to the important question – whether the healthcare providers (doctors) themselves use the Internet as a tool of health information empowerment? As such, in the Malaysian context, the focus of this study was on Internet Usage among Medical Doctors in Malaysia.

The present study attempts to determine the level of computer ownership among Malaysian doctors, their level of Internet accessibility and whether they prefer the Internet as their choice of health information provider.

Primary data was collected through a survey conducted by medical sales representatives (MSR) from Servier Malaysia Sdn. Bhd. 873 doctors from Peninsular Malaysia in both urban and rural areas, responded to a simple questionnaire that consists of twelve questions. In general, the majority of doctors surveyed were from the private sector in urban areas and are males aged between 41 to 50 years.

The study reveals that computer ownership among doctors in Malaysia is 90%. This clearly indicates a positive sign in terms of IT literacy among this professional group and they are at par with doctors in developing countries such as United Kingdom and USA.

Internet accessibility rate was 84% amongst doctors who were surveyed (included doctors who owned computers and those who did not) and a higher ratio of 94% in the group of doctors who already owned a computer. This clearly indicates that doctors in Malaysia are Internet savvy and far superior to their European and American counterparts.

There was no difference in Internet accessibility in doctors in public and private sector, between urban and rural areas and also in male and female doctors.

Younger doctors (aged 50 and below) were also more Internet savvy than those older doctors (aged 51 and above). This is consistent with most new technology tools, as younger doctors are more receptive to new technology and ideology.

The majority of doctors have had Internet access for more than two years. This shows that the importance of IT was well entrenched by governmental efforts.

One third of the doctors use the Internet 3 – 4 times a day and this is relatively a high usage of Internet as compared to an average Internet user.

Majority of doctors normally use the Internet at home.

The reason for not having Internet access was mainly because doctors did not find the need to have Internet access.

Malaysian doctors were more interested in obtaining medical related information when surfing the Net as compared to using for just e-mail purposes, in comparison with doctors worldwide. Surprisingly, Malaysian doctors were also less inclined to use the e-mail as compared to the average Malaysian Internet user.

When looking for medical related information online, Malaysian doctors had similar interest as doctors abroad, they looked mostly for disease information, next at medical journals and last at drug information.

For non-medical related information surfed by the doctors, finance/banking/share market was the first choice, followed by "other information" and politics came in last. Here, the doctors were more skewed towards business interests than politics.

The most important information looked for at the pharmaceutical company website was product information.

The results also showed that Internet was becoming an important source of medical information for doctors as it was ranked third after medical seminars and medical journals. This survey found that Internet was the preferred choice of health information provider than the MSR and pharmaceutical company brochure. In fact, the MSR was the least preferred choice of medical information provider. Thus, the declining interest of doctors from obtaining medical information from MSR's could also attribute to the increasing level of interest in using Internet.

There is no doubt that Internet has and will further gain popularity amongst doctors as an important channel of obtaining the latest medical related information.

It is inevitable that Internet will change the practice of medicine and the conventional role of MSR as it is changing the landscape of many other industries.

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