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### IS THE INTERNET USEFUL FOR CLINICAL PRACTICE?

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#### ABSTRACT

##### Background

Internet use in dentistry is increasing. The authors surveyed dentists to determine how they are using the Internet to support patient care and how useful they perceive the Internet to be.

##### Materials and Methods

The authors sent a 25-question survey to 455 subscribers to the Internet Dental Forum, an Internet discussion list. Participants completed the survey through a Web page or by e-mail during an 18-day period in December 1998. The survey included questions about when they began using the Internet and their motivations for doing so, their positive and negative experiences, where they use the Internet and why, their use of information resources—including electronic information resources—and demographics.

##### Results

The authors received 314 surveys from 438 participants, a 72 percent response rate.

Participants reported demographic characteristics similar to national averages and were highly computer-literate. Most considered the Internet essential for their practice and had increased their Internet use for professional reasons over time. Ninety-seven percent of respondents used the Internet at home, and 68 percent used it in the office. Only 5 percent used the Internet in the treatment area. The primary reason cited by participants for using the Internet was to keep up in general, followed by to answer patient-specific questions and to provide patient education. Reduction of professional isolation was one of the most frequently cited advantages of using the Internet.

## Conclusions

The authors found that some dentists use the Internet to support clinical practice and that it helped dentists adopt new techniques for patient treatment and obtain information on new materials or products.

## Clinical Implications

The Internet appears to support clinical practice mostly indirectly, by helping users keep up in general, rather than by answering specific clinical questions.



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Dr. Dodell is the administrator of the Internet Dental Forum. All grants for and subscriptions to the Internet Dental Forum are used to cover the direct costs of running the forum.

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