

Should you 'friend' your doctor on Facebook?

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When Walter Jordan played for the Cleveland Cavaliers in the 1980s, he had top-notch medical care. Whenever he was hurt, a team physician materialized immediately. If he had any kind of health question, it was answered in no time.

Fast-forward nearly 30 years: Jordan recently took a trip from his home in Georgia to New York to watch his daughter play in a high school basketball tournament. When he arrived at the hotel, he realized he'd left all his medications at home.

"Being a diabetic and a heart patient, I can't afford not to have my medications," Jordan said. "This happened on a Wednesday night, and I called my doctor's office first thing Thursday morning, and they were closed. Then I kept calling Friday, but I couldn't get a hold of anyone, and of course they were closed on the weekend. I never got my prescriptions, and when I got back home, I had some tests done, and my numbers were all bad."

Frustrated with closed offices, unreturned phone messages and other aspects of the sometimes-slow pace of doctor-patient communication, Jordan came up with a solution: He now sends his doctor messages on Facebook. He says that communicating with his cardiothoracic surgeon, Dr. William Cooper, on the social networking site has been easy and efficient.

"When I played with the NBA, I was blessed with the best medical care at my disposal," he said. "To have this relationship again, as a common citizen, is a great feeling -- even though this time it's via technology."

Jordan may be at the front edge of a trend: Surveys show that the traditional methods of communicating with doctors -- in person or on the phone -- may not be sufficient for patients anymore.

A study by Manhattan Research of nearly 9,000 U.S. adults showed that last year, 5 percent of respondents had sent or received an e-mail message to a doctor and that 49 percent were interested in doing so in the future.

A survey this year by the Deloitte Center for Health Solutions showed that 55 percent of consumers want to be able to communicate via e-mail with their physicians.

Although neither survey inquired about doctors and patients communicating via social networking sites, Deloitte plans to ask about it next time.

"In our next survey, we're going to ask if their doctor does Facebook, if their doctor tweets," said Paul Keckley, executive director of the Deloitte group, referring to Twitter, another popular social networking site.