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you to be certain that your security can't be breached; all electronic communications that contain any protected health information (PHI) must be encrypted. That means more security upgrades and strengthening of computer firewalls. As an aside, I hope all of you have paid attention to the electronic security provisions of HIPAA that just went into effect. If not, get moving on it, because it already is the law of the land.

Sometimes I wonder if we each need a full-time computer technocrat on our office staff. This expert might be fully compensated from expected e-mail revenues.

Finally, e-mail raises a concern about medical liability. Documentation should keep you out of hot water for the most part. However, e-mail is not like telephone encounters, in which the office staff can detect nuances of concern in a parent's voice that cue the staff to fit in a visit more quickly. Those vocal inflections cannot be detected in e-mail, and in my opinion there may be a slight increase in risk when giving medical advice via computer.

Furthermore, giving medical advice by phone usually follows accepted protocols and is defensible; similar guidelines would likely hold for e-mail communication. But I suspect those guidelines would less likely be followed. It could be argued that a doctor giving e-mail advice is preferable to a nurse giving phone advice—I suspect that may be true in most (but not all) cases—but those utilizing e-mail as a method of relaying medical advice need to document carefully.

I have responded to e-mail inquiries from a few patients, but only from family friends who happen also to be patients/parents in my practice. I am careful about the types of advice I give them, and I do not charge these friends for my expertise.

But if I begin to offer e-mail services to my regular patients, I absolutely will charge for my responses. I will carefully document the exchange, and will use the phone to bring the patient in to the office when I think the computer may be in over its monitor.

E-mail communication may be the wave of the future, and you certainly should feel free to jump on the bandwagon and participate. But do be careful with respect to the concerns outlined above—and then, tap away! ■

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FYI

NIH Starts Obesity Prevention Plan

The National Institutes of Health has unveiled an education program, "We Can! Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition," to help prevent overweight and obesity among children aged 8-13 years. More information on the program is available at http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov. Copies of the free parent handbook in English or Spanish can be requested by calling 866-359-3226.

Occupational Exposure Advice

The National HIV/AIDS Clinicians' Consultation Center, located at the University of California, San Francisco, offers the PEPline, a postexposure-prophylaxis hotline for clinicians. Experts provide around-the-clock information and advice on managing occupational exposures to HIV and hepatitis B and C. Call 888-448-4911.

Help Available for Talks on Sexuality

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is offering resources to help parents have talks with their teens about sex and relationships. The tools include a Web site and guidebooks. For more information, visit www.4parents.gov.

Web Site Offers Asthma Education

Everydaykidz, a Web site presented by AstraZeneca, offers tools for parents of children with asthma. The site includes facts on pediatric asthma, treatment information, and tools for helping parents better communicate with pediatricians and family physicians. For more information, visit www.everydaykidz.com.

Phone for SCHIP, Medicaid Eligibility

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is asking physicians to urge parents to call a toll-free number, 877-KIDS-NOW, to find out if their uninsured children are eligible for Medicaid or the State Children's Health Insurance Program. The Southern Institute on Children and Families, Columbia, S.C., serves as the national program office for the Covering Kids and Families initiative. For more information, visit www.thesoutherninstitute.org.

Getting Speech Therapy at School

The Stuttering Foundation has released "Special Education Law and Stuttering," a brochure to help parents obtain speech therapy for a child in the school system. To obtain a free copy, contact the Stuttering Foundation by calling 800-992-9392 or by visiting www.stutteringhelp.org.