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## Log in to consult your doctor

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CHENNAI: Medical consultation is going the 'e' way. In a two-pronged approach to make their services always available and retain patients, doctors are taking to technology.

Hospitals claim this is an ideal way to improve efficiency and control costs, as an increasing number of patients are willing to pay doctors to check reports and reply to their queries by e-mail. Though most doctors don't charge for e-mail services, they say they are able to retain the patient base, who return for annual check-ups. And it is not just the private hospitals that are on the net the Government General Hospital here will soon launch its e-consultation services.

Targeting tech-savvy doctors and hospitals, a private company has now launched call cards for consultation. "It works like any phone card, priced Rs 10 upwards. The customer is given a unique number with which he or she can call any doctor across the country. While the call charges would be according to the plan offered by the service provider, the consultation fee would be fixed by the doctor. Doctors charge Rs 10 to Rs 75 per minute," said Sunil Kulkarni of Oxigen, which recently launched the service.

The case of Dhananjay Mukherjee (name changed), 37-year-old techie, is an example of how the trend is gaining ground. Mukherjee was diagnosed as a diabetic two years ago at Dr Mohan's Diabetes Research Centre. "I told them I live in Kolkata and would not be able to come for follow-ups every three months. The hospital offered to do the follow-ups on the internet. They gave me a testing kit that provides an average reading for three months. I send them my blood sugar reports based on home tests. The doctor reads the report and revises my prescription," says Mukherjee, who is in Chennai for an annual follow-up.

His doctor, diabetologist Dr V Mohan says: "We don't charge patients for e-mail consultations yet. We provide it as an extended service because the patient feels another consultant would mean revision of drugs and possibly repeat of tests. When we do email consultations, they are confident and we retain the patient," he said.

Chennai's MV Hospital for Diabetes too has started an online service to tell diabetics if they are at risk of sexual dysfunction or problems of the foot. The hospital will soon introduce a facility that will enable patients to chat live with doctors. "We think it is essential because sexual dysfunction, particularly erectile dysfunction, can be the beginning of other problems," says Dr Vijay Vishwanathan who heads the hospital.

Most follow-up of surgeries is also done on the phone. Pilot studies have showed that an average phone consultation takes up to five minutes. On most occasions, calls were either for follow-up or second opinion. After cardiac surgery at Apollo Hospitals, a patient based in Madhya Pradesh sent a mail to the doctor recently asking if it was time to reduce the dosage of a medicine after his cholesterol level came down to normal.

"I replied that he should continue the medicine for some more time. Had he not got the option of emailing me the result, he would have stopped taking the medicine," said a senior cardiologist, who feels that the time doctors spend on replying to patients' e-mails should be included as consultation hours. "Emails have become part of the job. For the patient, it saves time and energy," he said.

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