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New online tool for physicians Web site aims to give doctors a place to post early warnings on problems with drugs and to discuss novel uses of medications

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Doctors on Long Island and across the country are using a new Web site to chat about health problems that might be linked to certain prescription drugs.

The free site, sermo.com, allows doctors to warn one another about adverse drug reactions without waiting for pharmaceutical companies or government officials to reveal problems like the deaths linked to Vioxx, the withdrawn arthritis medication.

In the past, some doctors have complained that the Food and Drug Administration and pharmaceutical companies waited too long to reveal serious drug reactions. Sermo aims to give doctors a place to discuss early warning signs as well as a forum to discuss novel ways to use medications.

Sermo - Latin for conversation - began operating in Cambridge, Mass., in October and has signed up more than 5,000 physicians.

The Web site is open only to doctors whose credentials are checked against several databases. Doctors in all 50 states can use Sermo, but it is not yet open to international use.

Sermo's chief executive, Dr. Daniel Palestrant, said Longworth Venture Partners in Waltham, Mass., has invested \$3.5 million in the Web site.



Palestrant, who no longer practices medicine, said after listening to doctors' concerns about drugs, "I had the idea we could create a mechanism where physicians could make these observations online."

Dr. Ross Sommers, a pediatric resident at Long Island Jewish Medical Center in New Hyde Park, said he's pleased with the help Sermo offers.

For example, Sommers said, "I asked a question about a medication most doctors know only works when it's inhaled, but some doctors keep prescribing the liquid form."

Sommers said more than 80 percent of those who responded said they don't use the liquid form of the medication anymore; he found that helpful.

Sermo accepts no advertising and is free of influence from pharmaceutical houses, Palestrant said. Palestrant hopes, however, to charge pharmaceutical companies for doing polls on the Web site. So far, none have signed up.

Physicians sometimes receive \$20 payments from Sermo after responding to its online polls, but the Web site does not inform them in advance that they will be paid.

Dr. Jeffrey Ellis, who practices dermatology part time in Manhasset and Rockville Centre and is a fellow at SUNY Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, said Sermo relies too much on gimmicks like the payments. Ellis is a founder of another Web site, journalreview.org, which allows doctors to discuss medical literature.

"If I have a specific clinical problem, I think I'd rather call someone that I know," Ellis said, but he noted that he might use Sermo to seek general observations about a particular drug.

Dr. Saul Nurok, a senior resident in emergency medicine at New York Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn, said Sermo allows him to access "a wealth of knowledge" from doctors across the country.

"It provides a lot of insights," Nurok said.

Recently, Nurok said, he learned that a drug commonly used for nausea also can help some patients tolerate gastrointestinal tubes.

Alan Goldhammer, deputy vice president for regulatory affairs for Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, an industry group,

said it appears Sermo can help doctors seeking information about prescription drugs.

But he said: "The concern would be that there would be discussion about adverse drug reactions that might not be statistically relevant."

The FDA did not return several calls seeking comment.

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