

NET A HEALTH TOOLKIT

MED E-CARE

A new interactive website, founded by three doctors, can help you maintain your health or manage a disease, and it can be used from cradle to grave

By LEA WEE

A WOMAN has just turned 35 and she receives an e-mail that not only wishes her a happy birthday, but also reminds her that she has to go for a Pap smear screening for cervical cancer.

Is someone pulling a sick joke on her?

No. Medfolders.com has something more serious in mind when it sends its subscribers e-mail like this.

The website, which is ready for use but will be expanded over time, will be launched officially next month.

It aims to be a person's health companion from cradle to grave, say the three young doctors who founded it.

Dr Beng Teck Liang, 28, Dr Eugene Loke and Dr Ho Choon Hou, both 27, say Medfolders.com does not plan to compete with the

gion of medical websites which feed its users with health information regularly.

Instead, it provides tools — from charts to reminder e-mail — to help you manage your health or disease.

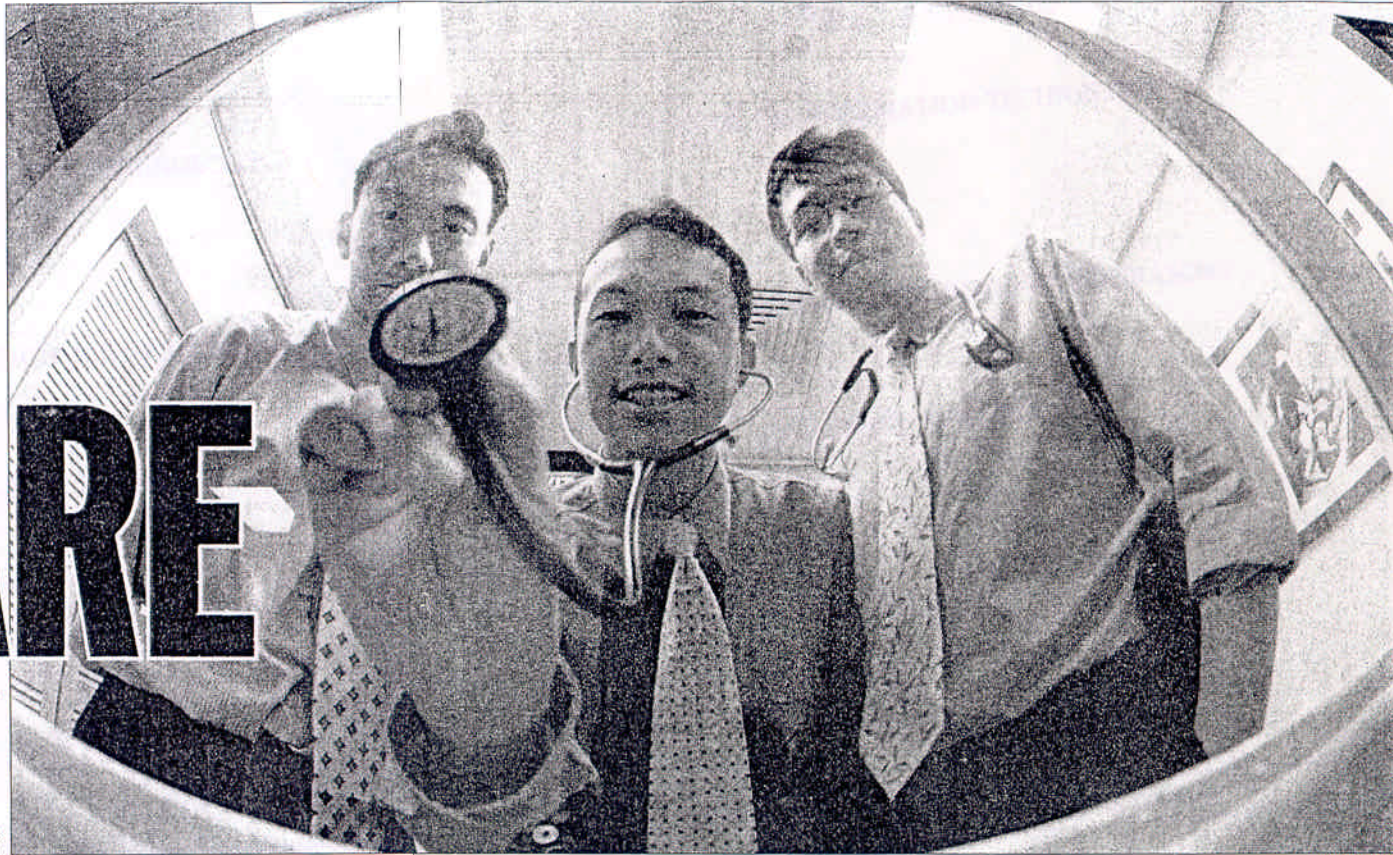
While Medfolders.com does give regular information in a folder called Medlibrary, it also has another folder, Medfolders, which helps you manage your health based on the basic medical data you have keyed in.

"It's a two-way exchange," says Dr Beng.

No registration is needed for Medlibrary, but the user needs a self-assigned user identification and password to access Medfolders. Pseudonyms are accepted and no fee is charged.

Other information which should be disclosed include age, sex, date of birth, blood group, drug allergies and other medical problems.

With these details, Medfolders responds automatically — drawing from a data-



Doctors who want to make a difference, (from left) Ho Choon Hou, Beng Teck Liang and Eugene Loke founded Medfolders.com.

base of cross-references — with the relevant health information. Thus, it fires off e-mail to remind users to screen for a certain disease when they enter a particular age bracket.

The founders hope that this interactive twist will give the website an edge over others (see other story).

"We do not want users to have to sieve through a whole lot of information for what they want, but to deliver the relevant information to their doorstep," says Dr Loke.

TWO TARGET GROUPS

MEDFOLDERS has two target groups in mind — those concerned with general well-

ness and those with specific diseases. It has created special folders — some are still not ready — to meet their needs. Here are some examples.

◆ **CALORIE INTAKE FOLDER:** For those who are worried about their expanding waistline, there are charts to help them monitor their daily calorie intake.

There is also a list of the caloric contents of Asian and Western dishes as well as a rundown on the calories that are burnt in various exercises.

◆ **PREGNANCY FOLDER:** This will be available in about a month's time.

Developed with the help of a hospital, it prepares the pregnant woman for any expected hiccups in each progressing week of her pregnancy and is accompanied by

DESMONDU PO

Born out of lunch breaks

ONE had the concept, another had the technical skills to implement it and the third did his sums and found it to be marketable.

Thus, Medfolders.com was born.

Its founders are Dr Ho Choon Hou, 27, the "concept man", Dr Eugene Loke, 27, the techie, and Dr Beng Teck Liang, 28, the "financial man".

The trio graduated from medical school five years ago — Dr Ho from Sheffield University in Britain, Dr Loke from the National University of Singapore and Dr Beng from Manchester Uni-

versity in Britain.

They met two years ago during their four-month officer-cadet training course and came to know one another's "strengths and weaknesses", says Dr Loke.

After the course, they went through their hospital postings here, but kept in touch. The idea for an interactive website was hatched over lunch and coffee breaks.

Says Dr Ho: "We wanted to apply our medical practice in other ways, besides just seeing patients, and we believe the way forward in medicine is in IT."

They are now waiting to embark on their postgraduate training — Dr Ho and Dr Beng want to be surgeons, while Dr Loke aspires to be a general practitioner.

But right now, their overriding passion is their website, which they describe as their community project. They are bracing themselves to spend all their free time on it.

"We want it to be a credible website, and not just a money-making one. Every bit of medical information on it is from a recognised source," Dr Ho says.

DOC COM: Other health websites

THERE are thousands of health websites on the Net. Most contain comprehensive health information and update the user on health news.

SINGAPORE SITES

◆ www.ezyhealth.com

This was launched in November last year by Singapore-based Ezyhealth Asia-Pacific and is tailored to needs here.

It provides news on health matters, chatrooms and an Ask The Doctor section.

◆ www.hol.com.sg

Asia Health Online is a subsidiary of MediMedia, an international publisher of medical materials.

Besides general health information, it has Cyberpharm at www.cyberpharmacy.net, which allows users to browse

through its over-the-counter products.

Another site, www.chinese-med.com, gives an online directory on traditional Chinese medicine organisations and physicians. It also allows users to order such medicine over the Net.

Together with NTUC Income, the site has also made medical records available on the Internet.

◆ www.gov.sg/moh

The Singapore Health Ministry's website provides information on policies and announcements of talks for the public.

It also has links to the various government and restructured hospitals, each of which have webpages devoted to health education for the public.

The ministry's website also has a store for you to order health books online.

◆ www.healthanswers.com.sg

This is part of healthanswers.com, a subsidiary of HealthAnswers Inc. It has a reference library, chatrooms and health tools.

FOREIGN SITES

◆ www.drkoop.com

A popular site created by the former United States Surgeon-General Everett Koop, with chatrooms.

◆ www.webmd.com

A new US-based site for both doctors and patients. It has an online medical library and tools.

◆ www.nih.gov/health

This US National Institutes of Health site is loaded with health information and carries links to other medical websites.

sketches of her foetus' development.

◆ **CHILD HEALTH FOLDER:** Also in the works is a folder which allows parents to chart their child's height, weight and head circumference, and to compare them with the population norm.

Attached will be an immunisation diary which sends e-mail reminders periodically about the baby's next injection.

◆ **DIABETES FOLDER:** Developed with the help of an endocrinologist, this helps diabetics monitor their blood sugar level, diet and weight.

◆ **MORE FOLDERS:** There are plans to open more folders for other lifestyle diseases such as cancer and heart disease.

Over time, older folders will also be updated.

All these, however, cost money.

So far, all funds needed for server maintenance, renting a leased line, marketing and promotion have come from the trio's own pockets.

While Dr Loke insists that the site is not a money-making venture, more money will be needed to rent an office space, to pay for its overheads and to employ programmers.

But the three hope that when facilities for storing X-ray images or laboratory test results are ready in future, they can charge users

for their use.

A major part of funds will come from advertisements from health-care-related companies and fitness centres.

For now, the site has won the sponsorship of pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson.

It will be lending its massive health-education information to the website, including videos.

Putting your vital health data on the web makes it accessible easily anywhere in the world, an advantage in this age of frequent travel, say the founders of Medfolders.com.

It also makes it easy for another doctor to access it, when you give him your user ID and password, and ensures continuity of care.

This is an advantage given Singaporeans' penchant for hopping from one doctor to doctor.

"It helps you cut costs and save time because you do not need to undergo another test or screening," says Dr Ho.

Recognising that security will be a concern for the user, Dr Loke adds that the data has been locked at both the user and server's end.

Medfolders.com has no access to each person's data, except for his user's identification and e-mail.

"If people are comfortable doing electronic and banking transactions, I do

not see why they should be less comfortable with this," he says.

"For those who are not comfortable, they need not use their real names or put in other sensitive information."

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS?

BUT Dr Anthony Soh, the general manager of Asia Health Online, which runs a virtual medical-record system, foresees a potential problem in getting users to key in basic health information.

His experience as a general practitioner for 10 years has told him that Singaporeans are generally not well-informed about their condition, the drugs they are on or are allergic to.

"What they enter into the records often needs to be verified by the doctor," he says.

But getting doctors to key in the patient's health information does not appear to be the solution, too.

Dr Soh says that, so far, Asia Health Online's attempts to get doctors to do so in its virtual medical records have met with lukewarm response.

"Some say they have no time, others are wary of the medico-legal consequences of sharing information. They

fear that whatever they key in may be used against them," he says.

"For instance, if a wife finds that her husband has syphilis from his medical record, then the doctor responsible for writing it down may be in trouble for a breach of confidence."

While Medfolders' founders recognise that its users might be limited to the young and fairly well-educated, this may soon change.

They point out that recent reports have shown that Internet home users in Singapore are growing and have hit 750,000, a penetration rate of 42 per cent.

A significant number of them are middle-aged.

The website is also eyeing Internet users in other countries.

Besides, they believe that the very act of having to key in medical information may compel users to find out more about their diseases from other websites, so as to ensure that they enter the right data.

Meanwhile, Professor Goh Lee Gan, the president of the Singapore Medical Association, has given his support for the project as a fellow colleague.

But as an association president, he says that he cannot endorse any portal until the product has been tried and tested.

For Mr Henry Koh Chye Kiat, 25, an information-technology professional, the site is "well-designed". He found the calorie intake folder particularly useful.

"I exercise a fair bit, so I found it useful to look at the exercises I have done, and how many calories I have burnt."

But one thing that can be improved is the health information in the Medlibrary, he says, adding that it could be padded up.

◆ *The website www.medfolders.com will be launched officially next month. You can go into it now, but the site is still being expanded. E-mail your comments to slife@sph.com.sg*