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Selected internet viewings

Welcome to the *Annals'* regular review of what's happening on the Web, what your patients are reading and what caught our eye this month.

If you wish to review web sites in your area of expertise, please E-mail your completed reviews directly to me, **Richard Gibbs**, at r.gibbs@imperial.ac.uk. Authors must NOT submit their reviews more than once.

The editors regret that they cannot enter into correspondence with authors. It may be some months before your submission is reviewed.

Varicose veins

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www.legveins.co.uk

This is an attractive website designed to inform patients about the nature of varicose veins and the treatment options available. It benefits from clear and concise wording with high resolution photographs to demonstrate the main features. The amount of information is just right to be informative without being overbearing. It is refreshingly honest about limitations in the treatments and is frank about potential side effects of surgical and non-surgical treatment options. It is encouraging about new treatments such as endovenous laser and foam sclerotherapy but states that long-term results are awaited. This site also contains links to other vascular conditions which may be of interest to this population. Overall, an excellent resource for the patient.****

www.familydoctor.co.uk/htdocs/varicose/varicose-specimen.html

A useful website for patients with varicose veins. It has clear information that starts at a very basic level but quickly progresses and guides the user through the complexities of venous disease.

Annotated diagrams complement the text and the user is slowly taken on an intellectual journey so that by the end of the article, they are understanding theories on the formation of lipodermatosclerosis. A purely information-based resource on the aetiology and pathology of the condition – no attempt is made to discuss diagnosis or treatment options. This is disappointing in that most users will be ultimately looking for information concerning treatment.**

www.nice.org.uk/guidance/search.aspx?o=ourguidance&ss=varicose+veins

A first-class website that is designed to give evidence-based information on the various treatment modalities available for varicose veins. The website is versatile so that it is useful for the academic clinician and the patient alike. There are links to PDF documents that give overviews of the treatment modalities and analysis of the current literature. The 'information for the public' section is simple, straightforward and unbiased. Other websites available can be criticised for being biased and simply used as advertising tools for individual surgeons, but this is written by an independent, well-respected body and patients would be well advised to read and digest this information prior to any intervention. Although an invaluable site, its layout is unappealing and a lack of pictures and diagrams can make the content seem somewhat dry.***

www.veins.co.uk

This web site is written by vascular surgeon Mark Whiteley, founder of the Whiteley Clinic which boasts the largest series of patients treated by VNUS® Closure (radiofrequency ablation) in the world. The website is bright, attractive and simple in format. It has audio and video clips to aid understanding and maintain interest. It immediately dispels many myths about varicose veins and guides the patients through their condition. As expected from an advertising/information website, the content is very positive and encouraging. The early results of treatment are explored in detail and users will be left with a strong impression that they will benefit greatly from treatment in this centre compared to traditional open surgery elsewhere. There is an internal link which gives detailed, annotated information on the various techniques available. Side effects of the newer techniques such as skin burning, phlebitis and paraesthesia, are somewhat overlooked, however. Overall, a thoughtful, compelling site that is a credit to its creator.*****

<http://www.harcourt-international.com/journals/ejvs>

This is a peer-reviewed publication entitled *Varicose Veins on the Internet* (*Eur J Vasc Endovasc Surg* 2000; **20**: 386–9). Its aim was to analyse the quality of information available to patients on the Internet concerning varicose veins. Various search engines were used to find the sites of interest. The conclusion was that longer documents presented by non-profit making organisations are more reliable than short documents offered by private medical groups. The article is rigorous, statistically sound and has been subject to the peer-review process. It ranks 41 web sites in terms of their educational value and usefulness to patients, the best of which is mentioned below. This adds a scientific edge to what would be an otherwise random selection of world-wide sites. It will appeal to clinicians with a specialist interest but is of limited value for the patient.**

www.gvg.org.uk/vvinfo.htm

This is a magnificent information resource for patients. It has been designed by the Gloucestershire Vascular Group and gives extensive information and advice. There are very good sections on 'complications of operations' and 'postoperative care' – sections that seem to be deficient in many other sites. This site is bright and easy to navigate with good, clear diagrams and photographs. It was cited as containing the best overall information on varicose veins available on the Internet and this seems to be well deserved. This is certainly a site of choice for patients.*****

Cultural circumcision

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Opinion within the medical profession is deeply divided as to whether circumcision for religious or cultural reasons should be offered on the NHS, or performed at all by medical practitioners. Medically unnecessary circumcision is almost routine in the US, but is on the decline. Whilst circumcision has always been a feature of Judaism and Islam, uptake even within these religious groups is now the subject of far greater debate. In recent years, a number of major studies in developing countries have strongly suggested that circumcision has a protective effect against the transmission of HIV. On the back of this evidence, in March 2007, the World Health Organization acknowledged that skilfully performed male circumcision has a role in preventing the spread of the disease (<<http://www.who.int/hiv/mediacentre/news68/en/print.html>>). The effect this will have on circumcision rates world-wide remains to be seen. In the West, however, where the risk of HIV is

relatively low, most circumcisions are still likely to be performed for other reasons. What resources are there on the internet to aid parents when making this decision, and what guidance is there for surgeons who may find themselves faced with the dilemma of whether or not to perform a medically unnecessary circumcision?

Netdoctor

www.netdoctor.co.uk/menshealth/facts/circumcision.htm

This page discusses circumcision in general and handles the topic of cultural circumcision in an extremely thorough and sensitive manner. It summarises the arguments of the major religions well, but also explains comprehensively the reasons for retaining an intact foreskin, as well as potential complications, including reduced sensation, bleeding and damage to the urethra or glans. The author is a qualified doctor, who writes in language which is extremely accessible to patients and parents. The writer concludes with the wish that the page: 'Might be a useful stimulus to thoughtful reflection on such a long-established traditional practice'. Overall, an excellent resource for those contemplating or facing circumcision.*****

Circumcision Information and Resource Pages

<http://www.cirp.org>

This site is the home-page of an antircircumcision group and is, therefore, rather one-sided. Some of the material is also emotive rather than constructive in its approach. Examples include phrases such as 'the practice of male genital mutilation is far older than recorded history' and 'the trauma of the experience is injurious. It can have long-term deleterious effects later in life.' That said, there are some links to some useful medical articles and there are also graphic photographs of a non-anaesthetised child being circumcised. There is so little debate on this site that it is unlikely to be of benefit to anyone looking for information to help them to clarify their viewpoint. It does, however, make sober reading for anybody planning on having their child circumcised in the 'traditional' way, and has some useful educational resources for the non-specialist.**

Family Medicine

<http://www.familymedicine.co.uk/features/circum.htm>

Family medicine is the home-page of a now out-of-print medical journal. Its website persists however, including this interesting debate on circumcision which incorporates the perspectives of doctors from the Jewish and Muslim communities, as well as a paediatric surgeon. The pages cover both the religious arguments for circumcision, potential complications and the medical indications in good detail. The page also includes a graphic description of a Jewish ceremony of circumcision, performed without anaesthetic. As one of the writers says: 'The foreskin of the penis arouses emotions among its supporters and opponents but health professionals must examine the issue objectively so as to play fair in dealing with their patients'. There is a page documenting the arguments against routine circumcision, which draws on evidence from several well-respected journals. Excellent for surgeons, patients and parents alike.*****