What is already known on this topic

The internet is a fast growing source of health information and support for patients

There has been little research on how people with a serious illness use the internet, or how this use may change their relationships with clinicians

What this study adds

People with cancer reported using the internet for a wide range of information and support needs at many different stages of their illness

Access to the internet allows people to check covertly the tests, treatment, and advice they receive from health professionals

People who access the internet to gain expertise about their condition can use this to show that they remain competent members of society despite serious illness

is to ensure that access is broadened through appropriate, supported public channels such as cancer information centres and public libraries.

Limitations of study

The interviews used in our analysis were collected for five individual projects for the DIPEX database, using the same interview methods and maximum variation sampling. The samples should not (individually or together) be interpreted as numerically representative of cancer patients, having been selected to represent the broadest practicable range of experience, as is appropriate to the aims of this qualitative study.

Many important questions about the impact of the internet are beyond the scope of a qualitative interview study. These include what impact the internet has on the consultation, how it affects patients' participation in decisions, what effect it has on health outcomes, and, indeed, what the relevant outcomes are. This study prepares the ground for further qualitative and quanti-

tative work by identifying the many different ways and stages at which information on the internet is used, as well as the meanings the internet has for patients and the implications for relationships in health care.

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A lesson on sustainable living

Despite an active academic interest in sustainable living and alternative energy sources and how to manage waste, I had always left the domestic aspects of our household waste to my homemaker wife. This was until we moved into our new home and met our new rubbish collector. He will remove only one full closed bin a week, and he completely ignored the black plastic sacks of rubbish that initially sat hopefully beside the official bin.

This man (once my nemesis but now my alternative energy guru) in one dismissive act of refusing to recognise those naked and unbinned black rubbish bags has educated my family on the 4 R's of Reduce, Reuse, Repair, and Recycle. Once carefree, irresponsible bin tossers, we have learnt to keep the waste minimal and the process clean and efficient by carefully separating and recycling items.

The recent discussions on whether smoking should be banned in public places rings a familiar note.

Sustainable living comes at a price, and there is initial hardship, the more so if you are a smoker. The vision of personal and global preservation is a worthwhile long term goal, but it still needs someone to kickstart the process.

Dilip Menon *emergency physician, Wrexham Maelor Hospital, Wrexham*

We welcome articles up to 600 words on topics such as *A memorable patient, A paper that changed my practice, My most unfortunate mistake*, or any other piece conveying instruction, pathos, or humour. Please submit the article on <http://submit.bmj.com>. Permission is needed from the patient or a relative if an identifiable patient is referred to. We also welcome contributions for "Endpieces," consisting of quotations of up to 80 words (but most are considerably shorter) from any source, ancient or modern, which have appealed to the reader.