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Patient-Physician Relationship in the Age of Expanded Access to Information

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In Reply Dr Weinlander argues that the characterization of the modern patient-physician relationship in our Viewpoint¹ was incomplete. Specifically, he contends that patients' decreasing dependence on physicians for access to information and health care resources does not, as we asserted, enhance patient autonomy.

In speaking of enhanced autonomy, we intended to convey that today's patients can independently access medical information and a growing array of products and services, free from physician gatekeeping, that they could not in the past. This modest claim seems indisputable. After all, any interested adult can perform a do-it-yourself electrocardiogram or order a genetic test that screens for 3 specific *BRCA1* and *BRCA2* mutations. Until recently, these tests were available only through a health care professional and were typically limited to patients with a medical indication.

Weinlander appropriately asks whether this new state of affairs is normatively preferable to the previous status quo. Perhaps being able to independently access medical information and take medical actions does not enhance, in the sense of improve, patient autonomy. We agree that physicians must help their patients interpret and understand complex medical information, whether from online sources or direct-to-consumer tests. We also agree that patients' access to information and direct-to-consumer products and services can lead to confusion and uncertainty and that physicians should be prepared to help patients interpret findings and pursue appropriate medical management options. Like Weinlander, we agree that physicians should inquire further before referring or ordering additional tests and screenings. Moreover, physicians should help patients appreciate why additional services are or are not needed, thereby promoting health literacy. In sum, we share Weinlander's view that physicians should not act as mere advisers and gatekeepers but should rather leverage their experience and knowledge to help patients use the available information and resources in ways that benefit them and cohere with their values and goals. The role of physicians may be changing, but it remains both challenging and ethically rich.

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