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A Medical Publisher's Unusual Prescription: Online Ads

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By some measures, the medical publishing world has met the advent of the Internet with a shrug, sticking to its time-honored revenue model of charging high subscription fees for specialized journals that often attract few, if any, advertisements.

But now Reed Elsevier, which publishes more than 400 medical and scientific journals, is trying an experiment that stands this model on its head. Over the weekend it introduced a Web portal, www.OncologySTAT.com, that gives doctors free access to the latest articles from 100 of its own pricey medical journals and that plans to sell advertisements against the content.

The new site asks oncologists to register their personal information. In exchange, it gives them immediate access to the latest cancer-related articles from Elsevier journals like *The Lancet* and *Surgical Oncology*. Prices for journals can run from hundreds to thousands of dollars a year.

Elsevier hopes to sign up 150,000 professional users within the next 12 months and to attract advertising and sponsorships, especially from pharmaceutical companies with cancer drugs to sell. The publisher also hopes to cash in on the site's list of registered professionals, which it can sell to advertisers.

Mainstream publishers have wrestled for years with the question of how to charge for online content in a way that neither alienates potential readers nor cannibalizes their print properties. So far, few definitive answers have emerged. Reed Elsevier, which is based in London, is taking a risk that its readers will drop their paid subscriptions and switch allegiance to the new Web site, which will offer searches and full texts of the same content from the moment of publication.

"It's a calculated risk, a bold step into the unknown," said Dan Penny, a senior analyst in London at Outsell, a market research firm.

But Reed Elsevier executives hope that OncologySTAT.com users will be an attractive target for advertisers, providing a model for an array of portals they could set up for health care professionals. Future sites may focus on specialties like neurology, psychiatry, cardiology and infectious diseases, company officials said.

Monique Fayad, an Elsevier senior vice president, said the total online advertising market was growing "in double digits" and added, "We expect it will be a \$1 billion opportunity within the next two years."

In just the last two years, the number of visits by physicians to online medical journals increased 27 percent, while readers of the printed versions declined 14 percent, according to Manhattan Research, a health care market research firm.

[OncologySTAT](http://OncologySTAT.com) will compete in a crowded field that includes free online information at Medscape.com; PubMed.gov, a service of the National Institutes of Health; and the National Cancer Institute's cancer.gov, as well as UpToDate.com, which supplies speedy authoritative answers to doctors' queries for a fee.

Wayne T. Gattinella, chief executive of WebMD Health, said the potential for online drug advertising was still far from fully realized. WebMD offers free information across 30 medical specialties on its Medscape site, with growing support from drug companies.

But Mr. Gattinella said that only about 3 percent of pharmaceutical marketing dollars are spent online. Much more still goes to consumer advertising on television and to salespeople who visit doctors.

Although Elsevier's medical and scientific journal business is profitable, revenue is flat and online readership is growing faster than print subscriptions. Reed Elsevier also owns LexisNexis, the online reference service, and trade publications like Variety; in July, the company sold its Harcourt textbook unit to Houghton Mifflin for \$4 billion but kept the 500 journals it acquired from Harcourt in 2000.

The OncologySTAT site will give registered visitors limited access to other publishers' journals, too. There will be free summaries, written by experts and updated weekly, of cancer-related articles from 25 other leading journals, like the Journal of the American Medical Association and The New England Journal of Medicine. Full texts of current articles in those non-Elsevier journals will still have to be bought until they become publicly available, typically in 6 to 12 months after publication.

The new Elsevier site's target users include doctors like Dr. Peter Yi, a cancer specialist in Princeton, N.J. Like the vast majority of oncologists, Dr. Yi already logs in regularly. He searches the Internet for updates as he treats patients. He gets at least 10 e-mail messages a day about new drugs and other research, and he subscribes to five medical journals, which he can also read online.

Looking at OncologySTAT for the first time, Dr. Yi said he liked the features it offers, like chemotherapy regimens, conference reports, drug interactions and the ability to search by cancer type. "Having it all under one roof makes it easier," he said.

But Dr. Leonard B. Saltz, a colon cancer expert at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer, said, "Another Web site was not what we desperately need." He added, "I know the literature of my area often before it is published." Beyond that, he uses the government site, PubMed, and the Google Scholar search engine to drill into research issues.

Doctors like Dr. Saltz who work at the big teaching centers have free access to most, if not all, of the journals. But oncologists away from those centers, like Dr. Yi in Princeton, see 85 percent of all cancer patients and rely on the Internet as their link to the knowledge base.

Getting the relevant answers promptly may be more important to doctors than not having to pay for them, said Elizabeth W. Boehm, a principal analyst at Forrester Research.

"Anything that is going to save the physician time, without losing the certainty that they have seen everything that they need to see, is potentially valuable," she said. "The question is, can they give them the information in a way that is more valuable, more easily searchable."