

My Patients Are Too Old to Use a Patient Portal— Don't bet on it!

Let's Look at the Data

*"This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us."
--Western Union internal memo, 1876.*

The implementation of any new technology goes through phases of adoption, during which highly credentialed skeptics abound. History is littered with their misguided quotes and discredited reputations.

Patient portals are following a typical adoption pattern. The early adopter physician practices have shown the portal's utility. There is no longer credible doubt that a portal can enable cost saving patient self service and data entry—same for its ability to drive targeted marketing. Stripped of these arguments, the skeptics have drawn a line in the sand with their belief that: "My patients are just too old to use the internet; patient portals will never catch on". Is that Western Union calling?

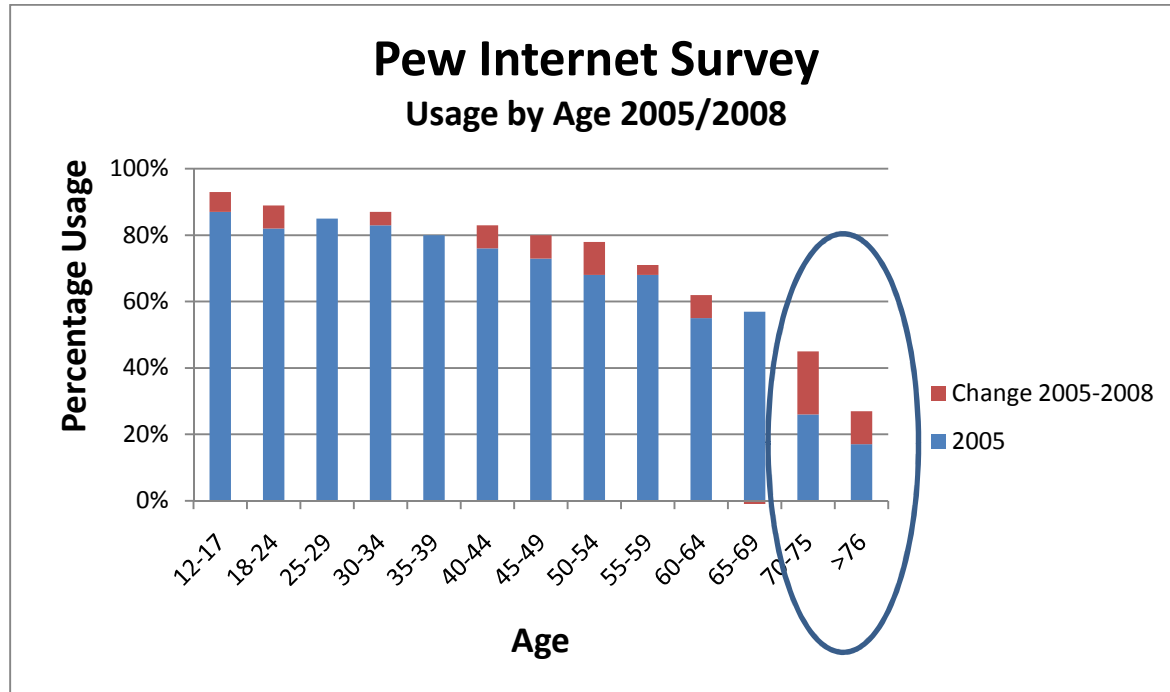
History will be the ultimate arbiter, but with the benefit of hindsight and the adoption of similar self service technologies used by the travel, financial and retail industries, I personally wouldn't advise betting against the patient portal. Let's look at some data that's useful regarding this question.

Who's Using the Internet?

Pew Research annually publishes data on internet usage by age groups. In addition, they frequently survey the desire to communicate with doctors on-line. The following chart in Figure 1 is useful for two reasons.

My patients are too old to use a patient portal – Don't bet on it!

Figure 1. Pew Internet Survey Usage by Age 2005/2008



Source: <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Generations-Online-in-2009/Generational-Differences-in-Online-Activities/2-Internet-use-and-email.aspx?r=1>

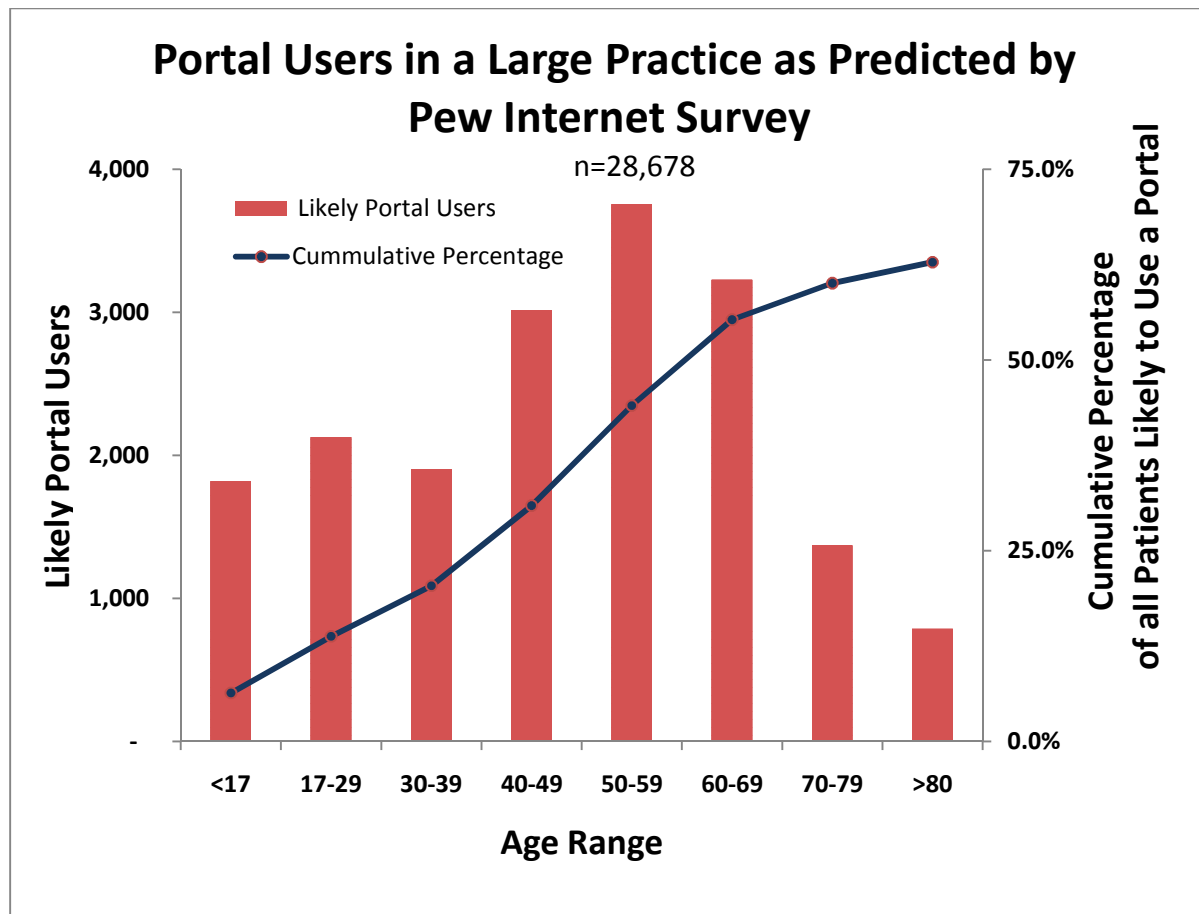
First, note the robust internet usage up through age 70. And second, that the fastest growing demographic for internet usage is those > 70, circled. In addition, seventy percent of those polled say they want to communicate with their physicians on-line.

The below chart in Figure 2 is derived by applying the Pew Internet percentages to the actual demographics of a large adult ophthalmology practice of 28,678 patients. The chart suggests several points.

- ❖ First, of likely users, the 50 to 70 demographic is the largest. This will take on additional significance as we look at family caregivers.
- ❖ Second, although potential users in the > 70 demographic represent a numerically smaller group of users, in total, approximately two thirds of this practice's patients would be likely users.

May patients are too old to use a patient portal – Don't bet on it!

Figure 2. Do These Usage Figures Apply to Ophthalmology Patients?—My patients are *really* old.



These adoption trends will likely increase both as web savvy patients age, shifting adoption to the right and also as more and more industries utilize web based self service applications.

Care Givers Can Benefit as Well

Currently 43.5 million adults, largely baby boomers aged 40 to 70 are involved caring for their parents ([Wall Street Journal](#)). If you're involved with Mom or Dad's care, and have difficulty attending their appointments, but are frequently asked after the fact to sort things out, you'll understand the portal's utility. The Meaningful Use provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act have mandated that visit summaries and health histories be available for electronic distribution. Imagine being able to easily get a clinic visit summary with an active medication list when Mom or Dad ask you to sort through their medication shoe box!

May patients are too old to use a patient portal – Don't bet on it!

Although adoption of patient portals for patient—physician communication will be a gradual process, the natural question from this data is—Can physicians ignore a profitable technology that a large majority of their patients are currently ready to use? Take heed, or risk sounding like some of the infamous technology doubters!

There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home."

--Ken Olson, president, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment Corp., 1977

Paul C. Seel, MD, MBA
Vice President & Medical Director, Sophrona Solutions

May patients are too old to use a patient portal – Don't bet on it!