

Online doctors' appointments being planned for Quebec

Patients warned to be cautious of private service

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QUEBEC - A Quebec company is developing a "doctor Web" service that will enable patients to reach physicians by video conference when they have a health issue.

But physicians' associations are warning patients to be cautious about the service.

For a monthly fee of \$10, a patient can become member of the virtual clinic, paying \$50 for each online medical consultation.

Quebec City-based Myca promises that the patient will be able to chat with a doctor within three hours. The company insists the service -- to be launched in June -- could bring relief to the overstretched medical system.

"This is a great way for people to get fast access to a doctor, especially in Quebec, where we are facing an important shortage," said Myca medical affairs vice-president Yves Dugre, a former head of the Quebec federation of medical specialists.

Dr. Dugre acknowledged that the service has limitations because the physician cannot examine the patient physically.

"This is not aimed at complicated cases, but rather at minor cases or follow-ups for chronic illnesses," he added.

But the Web clinic has the Quebec College of Physicians worried, and Quebec's Health Department has ordered an investigation to determine if it is legal to charge patients for such a service.

"It also raises a lot of ethical questions," said Isabelle Merizzi, spokeswoman for Health Minister Philippe Couillard. "If those doctors have the time to go on the Internet to see patients, why don't they spend more time in the universal public health system instead?"

The service will be offered only in Quebec at first, but the company eventually wants to make it available elsewhere in the country. Myca believes it is the first service of its type in Canada.

The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) were not able to comment on the specific case yesterday. But in its physician guidelines for online communication with patients, the medical association calls for caution when it comes to virtual medicine.

"Currently, a variety of guidelines appear to discourage or forbid a purely online or virtual patient-physician relationship.

"Emphasis is generally placed on the importance of face-to-face, in-person encounters and the use of electronic communications only as a means of follow-up, clarification, monitoring, etc., within the context of an existing relationship," states the document.

It adds that its "current reluctance may well be revisited, especially so in cases where physical access to a physician is severely limited or nonexistent (for example, in remote or emergency settings)."

The idea interests the Action democratique du Quebec, the province's official Opposition, which has been pushing for more private-sector involvement in health care.

"This is a very interesting idea that is suited for a certain type of patient and that can help relieve the public system," said ADQ health critic Eric Caire.