



MANFRED WILL

Web 2.0 For Doctors

Doctr.com aims to improve information exchange among physicians | By Mehmet Toprak

The start page of Doctr.com presents a list of the latest news. Headlines like “Scarless nephrectomy through transluminal endoscopy” signal that this site is by and for professionals. But 32-year-old Kai von Harbou and his team are looking beyond mere news. They’re trying to establish a network – or as it’s known in Internet jargon, a community.

On Doctr.com, registered users can create their own profiles and exchange information, thoughts, ideas and experiences with other members. “Doctors often miss out on interdisciplinary exchange of ideas and information sharing,” he said. Doctr.com hopes to remedy exactly this shortcoming.

Using the platform, a doctor can stay in constant contact with colleagues. This is especially practical at conferences or while abroad doing research. The MD portal also hopes to encourage networking between research and real-world applications at the office.

Anyone expecting rafts of dry texts and obscure tables will be

pleasantly surprised. Von Harbou and his technical team have created a hip site with personalized start pages, online videos, wikis, forums and even social bookmarking. This is Web 2.0 for the heirs of Hippocrates.

Members can upload photos, graphics and even videos for teaching purposes and share them across the network. To prevent laypeople from lurking on the network and chatting with their general practitioners, only licensed doctors can access Doctr.com. Membership is free.

The project is being financed through advertising but the site’s operators are mainly focusing on partners like insurance providers, carmakers, medical technology companies and the tourist industry. Advertising from the pharmaceuticals industry is explicitly not part of the picture. This helps ensure the independence of Doctr.com.

Doctr.com may be a German project but von Harbou says the success of American virtual communities for doctors encouraged him to establish the site. Having

worked for several years in the U.S. as a research fellow and resident physician in prestigious clinics in New York and New Haven, he is familiar with such communities. Online forums became routine for many of his U.S. colleagues long ago.

Von Harbou hopes the German medical profession will soon catch up. To help those getting started, a pop-up window gives visitors a tour of the site and its features. Additionally, the Doctr.com team has tried to configure the site and its operation as simply and intuitively as possible.

“One of the difficulties is convincing older doctors of the advantages of Web 2.0 applications,” said von Harbou. His private practice is located in his home in Potsdam, the posh capital of Brandenburg right next door to Berlin. Von Harbou lives there with two Cavalier King Charles Spaniels.

Medically speaking, the U.S. is both a paragon and a pioneer, and not just in Internet applications. German doctors who worked professionally or even completed an

internship there have outstanding career opportunities later, even in Germany. America’s prominence in research is beyond question, says Katja Kraemer of Hartmann Bund, the professional association of German doctors.

The fact that medical conferences are often held in the U.S. shows just how far ahead of the curve American doctors are compared to their German colleagues, Kraemer explains. American research remains cutting edge because it also has the advantage of private donors filling the coffers of university research institutes. Top universities like Yale select only the best among their numerous international applicants.

German doctors at U.S. hospitals are fascinated by the international flavor and their career chances there, says Von Harbou. “Foreigners can definitely make a career of it in the U.S. if they’re good,” he said. “In Europe, foreign doctors often have a much harder time.”

Still, German health care has a number of advantages in inter-

national comparison. It is considered to be better-structured and more thorough than health care in the U.S. “German medical training is the most highly regarded in Europe,” said Kraemer. The ideal doctor, therefore, would have studied in Germany, done research in the U.S. and has had internships in Japan, France and England.

And that is almost exactly the career path von Harbou has taken so far. Still, he traded a predictable and secure medical career for an exposed but much more exciting one as a dot-com start-up founder. Not long after launching, Doctr.com grew to 500 regular users.

That may not seem like much, especially when measured against the more than 407,000 doctors working in Germany. But business-oriented networking sites like Xing have shown that success can come in the blink of an eye when the provider not only understands the technology but also the needs of its end users – as von Harbou seems to. ■