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SOCIAL NETWORKING MAY BENEFIT PATIENTS WITH COMMON SKIN DISEASE; NEW DATA FROM THE CENTER FOR CONNECTED HEALTH PUBLISHED BY JAMA/ARCHIVES JOURNAL

Virtual communities offer valuable educational, emotional and social support for people with psoriasis.

BOSTON, MA, JANUARY 21, 2009 – In a recent study conducted by the Center for Connected Health, a division of Partners HealthCare, first of its kind data reveals that online support communities and social networks appear to benefit patients with psoriasis, a disorder which affects the skin and joints, commonly causing red scaly patches on the skin. Psoriasis is associated with other serious conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity, and as many as 7.5 million Americans have psoriasis. This study was published in the current issue of *Archives of Dermatology* (Vol. 145, No. 1, January 2009), which is one of the *JAMA/Archives* journals.

The Center for Connected Health conducted an online survey of 260 individuals recruited from five online psoriasis support groups. Nearly half of all study participants reported improvements in their quality of life (49.5%) and psoriasis severity (41%) since joining the site. Key factors reported with use of online support sites included availability of resources (95.3%), convenience (94%) and the lack of embarrassment when dealing with personal issues (90.8%).

“Increased access and use of the Internet is allowing patients to gather information and interact in new and beneficial ways, and is helping to empower people to improve their health and quality of life,” said Joseph C. Kvedar, MD, Director, Center for Connected Health and Associate Professor of Dermatology at Harvard Medical School. “This is the first such study to evaluate online support groups in the field of dermatology, and offers rich insight into the potential benefits and usage of virtual patient communities.”

Online support sites allow people to interact in a variety of ways, with some participants being ‘patient experts’ and some ‘information seekers.’ In the Center for Connected Health study, 75% of respondents felt the online support site offered them someone to turn to for information, and 64.6% replied to messages.

“Psoriasis is a chronic skin disease that can impact many aspects of a patient’s life, including emotional, physical, sexual and financial well-being,” added Alice Watson, MD, MPH, Corporate Manager, Center for Connected Health, and the

study's principal investigator. "As a result, it is important to provide patients with access to psychological support, but traditional face-to-face support groups don't always work for these patients due to inconvenience or embarrassment. Online social networks can provide patients the opportunity to discuss sensitive issues, reducing feelings of depression and loneliness, and empowering patients to achieve improved quality of life."

Psoriasis is a chronic, autoimmune disease of the skin. It occurs when the immune system sends out faulty signals that speed up the growth cycle of skin cells. Psoriasis is not contagious. The most common form of psoriasis, plaque psoriasis, appears as raised, red patches or lesions covered with a silvery white buildup of dead skin cells, called scale. Psoriasis can occur on any part of the body and is associated with other serious health conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease and depression. According to the National Institutes of Health, as many as 7.5 million Americans have psoriasis.

About the Center for Connected Health

The Center for Connected Health, a division of Partners HealthCare, is creating effective, new solutions and innovative interventions to deliver quality patient care outside of the traditional medical setting. Our programs use a combination of remote-monitoring technology, sensors, and online communications and intelligence to improve patient adherence, engagement and clinical outcomes. The Center also offers expert online second opinions, enhanced medical education and training, and engages in innovative research to discover new pathways to better care, including the use of virtual worlds and online coaching. Visit www.connected-health.org.

Boston-based Partners HealthCare is an integrated health system founded in 1994 by Brigham and Women's Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital. In addition to its two academic medical centers, the Partners system also includes community and specialty hospitals, community health centers, a physician network, home health and long-term care services, and other health-related entities. Partners is one of the nation's leading biomedical research organizations and a principal teaching affiliate of Harvard Medical School. Partners is a non-profit organization. Visit www.partners.org.

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