

ClimateGP

Web based patient education

People with chronic disease need to know how to manage their disorders. While doctors often lack time to educate patients, online learning is always available. ClimateGP is an online education suite that combines patient education with feedback to, and guidance from, the doctor. It covers the major chronic diseases and will soon cover the common smoking, nutrition, alcohol and physical activity (SNAP) risk factors. ClimateGP also provides web based continuing medical education approved by The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. ClimateGP is currently the subject of randomised controlled trials, with preliminary results showing that it is effective and comparable to other established patient education materials.

The continuing management of people with chronic disease is a difficult task, particularly in a fee for service environment. On a good day – waiting room nearly empty, telephone quiet – most doctors can tell patients what they need to know to manage their health. On a bad day – waiting room full, telephone ringing incessantly – few doctors can find the necessary time or concentration.

The ClimateGP suite of courses began when general practitioners completing the Master of Psychological Medicine program at the University of New South Wales reported that patients with anxiety or depressive disorders did not seem to understand the need for continuing care.

When we produced the first courses for these patients, general practitioners remarked that similar courses for chronic physical diseases would also be useful in helping patients to understand the rationale behind their treatment.

ClimateGP began as a computer based patient education system designed to run in a GP's office under the supervision of the GP or practice nurse. However, with some 60% of Australians having access to the internet it proved more practical to move the system to an online environment, while retaining the doctor's ability to keep track of each patient's progress.

ClimateGP – available at www.climategp.tv – is now a web based, patient education strategy with 16 courses covering eight chronic conditions – anxiety, arthritis, asthma, breast cancer, depression, diabetes, heart failure and incontinence. Courses for alcohol abuse, for carers of people with dementia and for cardiovascular disease risk factors based on The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) SNAP guidelines are in preparation.

Each module is supported by evidence based clinical practice guidelines reshaped by clinicians to be comprehensible to the average patient. The authors of the courses, and peak advisory bodies, are listed on the website.

ClimateGP uses an illustrated storyline divided into a series of lessons to show how a patient should manage their disease. It then provides printable homework assignments to supply further information; the homework is evaluated at the next lesson. ClimateGP also measures the patient's symptoms and wellbeing at each lesson.

Doctors prescribing ClimateGP have access to an online 'doctors club' where they can view the progress of their patients, including how many lessons each patient has completed and their symptom and wellbeing scores at each lesson. ClimateGP automatically flags patients whose symptom and wellbeing indicators are deteriorating.

Doctors can inspect the illustrated storyline and homework that their patients will see. There are also news items, links and additional reading, and a discussion forum only open to doctors using ClimateGP (*Table 1*).

Online continuing medical education can be useful, and can be much more than just an electronic text.¹ There is also considerable evidence that web based material alone is not particularly helpful in educating patients. Only 2% of people complete such programs, whereas when a clinician offers guidance, advice and motivation, 30–50% of patients stay with the program.²

It is for this reason that ClimateGP offers continuing medical education (CME) matched to its patient education courses, so that doctors are in a position to offer the best advice and guidance. The doctors club currently has two 6 hour, RACGP approved web based, active learning CME modules: one on the recognition and management of anxiety disorders the other on the recognition and management of depressive disorders.

ClimateGP appears to work. The first cohort of patients to use ClimateGP showed a 26% improvement in functioning, not just change in knowledge, which is consistent with other patient education programs.³ ClimateGP is currently the subject of randomised controlled

Gavin Andrews

AO, MD, is Professor and Head, Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression, University of New South Wales at St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney. gavina@unsw.edu.au

Table 1. Subscribing to ClimateGP and recommending courses to patients

- Go to www.climategp.tv
- Select 'doctor-register' – 'new user' to enrol for a 6 month free subscription
 - clinicians have free, unlimited use for the first 6 months, after which there is an annual subscription, currently set at \$100 per year
- Your login and password for the 'doctors club' are emailed to you
- Patient coupons can be ordered in blocks of 20 and can be given to patients who might benefit from ClimateGP, specifying the appropriate course
 - doctors, when they prescribe ClimateGP, might say, 'I'd like you to get on the web and go to www.climategp.tv. It will teach you ways of managing your disorder better. Log in as a new patient using this coupon number and course code. Do the first lesson in the course and complete the homework. In about 2 weeks, log back in and do the second lesson and so on until you have finished all lessons. I'll be able to see your progress on my computer. I'll ask you to come back if progress is not what I would expect, and you can make another appointment to see me at any time to discuss what you're learning. Patients who combine ClimateGP with their doctor's advice do better than those who use ClimateGP on their own'
- Chart patient progress, access CME, news, bulletin board and other resources at the doctors club

and utilisation trials, but it will be 2 years before full results become available.

Conflict of interest: none declared.

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References

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afp CORRESPONDENCE email: afp@racgp.org.au