# Online Medical Crowdsourcing Can Save Lives

**A doctors-only crowdsourcing site is giving physicians more resources to improve care.**

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When Canadian physician John Fernandes was told earlier this year that there would be no way to rid a four- year-old girl of the same Escherichia coli strain that had claimed her brother's life, Fernandes turned to a physician crowdsourcing site hoping for better news. His persistence was rewarded; within minutes, he received advice for follow-up testing and treatment from physicians across the globe and, ultimately, helped to cure the girl of the infection.

Similarly, Utah-based family physician Easton Jackson was puzzled by the symptoms of a patient who had, unbeknownst to him, a rare and urgent bronchial condition. Within an hour of consulting the same site, called SERMO, Jackson was able to make a diagnosis and recommend immediate treatment.

Fernandes says that these challenges once would have been prime fodder for discussion in doctors' lounges, where collegial discourse could lead to "incredible innovations and ideas that we could put into immediate practice to the benefit of patients."

But as those lounges dwindle in number, the discourse has re-emerged online. And their virtual incarnations have the capacity to tap into vast knowledge bases that are accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. SERMO has a particularly large membership — approximately 380,000 members worldwide, according to the company, all of whom are verified and practicing physicians.

Fernandes and Jackson praise that exclusivity, which they say helps SERMO to maintain a certain tier of expertise and credibility. Conversely, having the site allow doctors to post anonymously permits physicians "to admit things they would probably never otherwise hear in a public forum," says SERMO CEO Peter Kirk.

SERMO is not the only physician crowdsourcing tool in the game. Others include CrowdMed, a patient-driven diagnosis site that relies on "medical detectives" to solve difficult cases, and Figure 1, a medical image-sharing app for doctors that's similar to Instagram but geared toward solving unusual medical cases. Figure 1 recently announced that it had surpassed 500,000 members, though only a portion of that group is verified as either a health care provider or student.

The rise of websites like SERMO is another sign of decentralization in health care. Where once the health care community would celebrate the advice of key thought leaders, "today the wisdom of the crowd tends to outperform one individual expert, Kirk says.

"[SERMO allows] doctors to effortlessly work on their terms, regardless of provider systems and regardless of payer systems," Kirk explains. "The impact of this can really be significant, both in terms of improving individual outcomes, and in terms of the more intellectual outcome of what happens when knowledge is shared."