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Wiki Doc Founder Aims to Help Patient Care by Improving Access to Medical Knowledge

By Tiffani Sherman

It's 3 a.m. and a young doctor is alone in a small emergency room when something goes wrong with an unusual case. She doesn't have another doctor to talk to but she has her smartphone.



C. Michael Gibson, MD

If C. Michael Gibson, MD, has his way, that resident will turn to [WikiDoc.org](http://www.wikidoc.org) (http://www.wikidoc.org/index.php/Main_Page), an online self-proclaimed living textbook of medicine with more than 100,000 pages of current content.

Gibson, an interventional cardiologist, cardiovascular researcher and educator, helped found the website back in 2006 and now more than 2.5 million users access it daily to read or edit the free material.

“If we have information available that could save someone’s life, why shouldn’t we share that?” Gibson said.

The idea for a free repository of information came to Gibson several years ago while he was helping a young physician collect copies of papers he had co-authored to include in an application. To get them, the young doctor had to pay the journals for each one, even though he was a co-author on the paper and had provided the content to the journal.

Gibson said he thought that didn’t seem right.

“As a researcher, I spend all my life collecting data and then I would turn it over to a journal,” Gibson said. “Copyright was developed back at the time of the invention of the printing press and it protects the publisher, not the researcher.”

Now, as many as 30 physicians who work with Gibson at Harvard Medical School meet twice a day to create and edit content on the site. Most of the work is done on a volunteer basis by young doctors who are applying to residency programs. “They have a need to learn and we have a need to stay current.” Gibson said.

Wiki Doc considers itself “copyleft, not copyright.” According to the site’s mission pages, copyleft means a way to use the copyright process to prevent information from being controlled by any one person and to ensure it remains freely accessible forever. Anyone can copy, redistribute and modify information from Wiki Doc as long as they credit the original article.

“You don’t get to take financial credit for it,” Gibson said.

The site is designed with micro chapters, perfect for mobile devices. The whole idea was to keep information accessible in parts of the world where computers aren’t always easily available but mobile devices may be.

“Medical information is out of reach for people in most of the world,” Gibson said.

Online journal subscriptions can cost hundreds of dollars a year. In some countries, physicians make less than \$30 a month, making current online information inaccessible.

“We think we are the world, but most of the world doesn’t have the means to go behind a paywall,” he said, “the goal of Wiki Doc is to liberate that information.”

As of now, most of the content is in English, but Gibson said Wiki Doc is working to translate many articles or find other programs to do the translations. Analytics show doctors accessing the site from all over the world, and traffic is high from India, Italy, Brazil, and the Philippines.

There is no registration or login required to access Wiki Doc and anyone can contribute content and edit articles as long as their curriculum vitae is on file. Gibson called it moderated wisdom. The place for doctors to discuss findings and present differing viewpoints is on the discussion pages.

The site is free and funded by donations. "It's costing us a substantial amount of money just for the bandwidth," Gibson said, but the organization does not accept money from pharmaceutical or device makers. "We don't think they should be part of the educational process. Nobody is getting rich, but it's worth the fight to liberate the information."

Gibson says the reward for him is knowing thousands of doctors use the site each day to continue their education. In a class at Harvard Medical School, Gibson can reach just a few students. On Wiki Doc, he can potentially reach millions and help improve patient care.

"It's a way I can give back to medicine and really help. It's definitely not a job, it's a passion," he said.

As one can imagine, some journal publishers aren't too happy about Gibson's quest to make all of this information free, but Gibson doesn't seem to mind the backlash.

"They didn't create the information, the doctors did," he said. "When it comes to health care and someone's health improving, we really should make the content that could help them free," he said. "There really shouldn't be a barrier to access information that could save someone's life."

Wiki Doc is also a way for doctors to make sure they're on the right track, like the lonely ER doctor at 3 a.m. who just needs someone to reassure her. With so many demands on a physician's time, it's impossible to keep up with all the current information, Gibson added.

"The tribe is smarter than one," he said. "If we bring everyone together in one spot, we can make every doctor better."

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