

## Pfizer Joins Online Doctors' Forum

By Mark Jewell, October 15, 2007

A year-old online forum where 30,000 doctors swap medical observations has lined up a partnership with Pfizer Inc. — an alliance that runs counter to the site's founding ideal to give doctors a place to communicate without the pharmaceutical industry listening in.

Under a collaboration to be announced Monday with Cambridge-based Sermo Inc., Pfizer will work with the fast-growing Web venture and its participating doctors to agree on terms allowing Pfizer's hundreds of staff doctors to view postings and reply.

Rules are to be worked out in online "town hall" meetings involving Pfizer and Sermo's physician members. But it's expected any postings by Pfizer's medical staff must be clearly identified as coming from a Pfizer source logging onto the system securely from an office computer, said Daniel Palestrant, Sermo's CEO.

When the service began in September 2006, it was intended as an advertisement-free forum for communication among doctors about topics such as drug side effects — in effect, a sanctuary from the influence of pharmaceutical industry and its sales staffs.

But recent online polls and focus groups involving Sermo members indicated a clear desire to seek industry participation in a controlled fashion, while continuing to bar ads on the site. The findings led to the collaboration with New York-based Pfizer, the world's largest pharmaceutical company, Palestrant said.

"These doctors are saying, 'We want to have a different type of relationship with the industry,'" said Palestrant, a former surgery resident at a Boston hospital. "Doctors in our focus groups would say, 'In many cases, the most timely and interesting information on drugs comes from the industry. But I want that information on my terms.'"

Pfizer will tap into a social network of doctors that resembles the popular Web site MySpace, but with the focus on professional concerns rather than personal information.

Pfizer's hundreds of medical staff will be able to access Sermo, but it will be off-limits to the rest of the company's 90,000 employees, said Dr. Michael Berelowitz, a senior vice president who oversees Pfizer's physicians.

"There will be great care taken to ensure the information we provide is transparent and clear, and done with full disclosure," Berelowitz said.

Pfizer sees Sermo as a way to supplement communication with doctors that now relies heavily on medical journal articles and posting of clinical trial information on government registries.

"It creates a social discourse around the results, which is very different than a rather cold transmission through other media, where you don't have that two-way communication," Berelowitz said.

Berelowitz said Pfizer also has allied itself with Sermo because of the site's growing influence in medical circles.

Sermo says it's adding physician members at a rate of 1,000 to 2,000 a week. It reached an agreement in May with the American Medical Association, and in August with the Food and

Drug Administration. The agency's Center for Devices and Radiological Health entered a six-month agreement to monitor doctors' Sermo exchanges and eventually gauge whether to rely long-term on Sermo's postings to supplement existing government systems to track product safety.

The Pfizer pact is Sermo's first with the pharmaceutical industry. But Palestrant said his company is in talks with other companies as well.

Privately held Sermo makes money by charging investment professionals such as hedge fund managers to view postings that could serve as tip-offs to market-moving medical trends.

U.S. doctors sign up free of charge by sharing personal information including medical license numbers. Sermo verifies the information against records databases to try to prevent postings by non-doctors. Doctors post anonymously.

Other doctors rank postings based on whether the information appears credible — a "wisdom of the crowd" approach designed to assign low rankings to spurious claims that should be read with skepticism.

The system hasn't been trouble-free. Palestrant said Sermo upgraded its user authentication requirements after medical bloggers recently posted stories in which they said they obtained physician medical license data and logged onto Sermo by impersonating doctors.