

Medics find healthy pulse online

MediaLab game raises prospect of teens self-diagnosing depression on the net



Matthew Magee

JUST how dangerous can computers be? That will be the question raised again early next year when Dublin's MediaLab Europe research centre releases the prototypes of a computer game that has been designed as a tool to diagnose teenage depression. Unsupervised use, unreliable information and the potential to source drugs online can make the web a dangerous place for seekers of medical help.

MediaLab may yet publish the role-playing game online, making it available for use without medical supervision and prompting inevitable questions about the unsupervised use of technologies for self-diagnosis and even self-medication.

But when the prototype is released, its authors may well find that the medical profession's attitude has softened from suspicion to acceptance. Pilot technology projects within health services, including Ireland's, and the emergence of reliable sources of information are changing minds in GPs' surgeries and in hospitals.

"We have had interest from Temple Street, St Vincent's and James' is next," said Marie Lalor, project manager of Healthlink.ie, a project that digitally links hospitals and GPs, and which this month announced a move online.

The project makes patient

records available instantaneously to hospitals and to the GPs treating a patient, saving time and anxiety for the patient and saving administration costs for the hospital and surgery.

"Surgeries would receive lab tests and reports by paper, and employ people to type it into their own system," said Lalor. "Now they can come straight into the system and doctors can see the records more quickly."

Medicine and the web have not been easy bedfellows. The astonishing amount of quackery readily available online turned many doctors against the idea of seeking health information on websites. While many sites are responsible and useful, how can a patient be trusted to tell the difference between the genuine article and the crackpot snake-oil selling theory?

"This is a problem for patients alright," said Brian Meade, a Dublin GP who chairs the Irish College of General Practitioners' health informatics group.

"If you look online for ME, all sorts of hoax cures appear, and what happens is that people get false hope. The same goes for cancer, diets, sexual dysfunction... with sites promising the earth to people."

The unreliability of unmediated health advice is what has turned many medical professionals off the internet as a source of information but Meade, who is involved in training programmes to encourage doctors to use PCs and the web, says that acceptance is growing among GPs.

"I think, with the increasing availability of broadband, the real value is that you can look

at things with the patient in front of you: you can look together," he said.

"There are reputable sites, such as the British Medical Journal, out there now. I think most doctors would know if a site is trying to sell you something, if it is biased. The advantages are that you can check on updates on travel advice for obscure places, or get access to support groups for people with unusual diseases."

But with some suspicion remaining about unsupervised access to PC-based health tools, the man behind the teen depression role playing game at MediaLab, Mater Hospital child psychiatrist John Sharry, has not yet decided whether or not to allow teens to engage in the self-analysis alone.

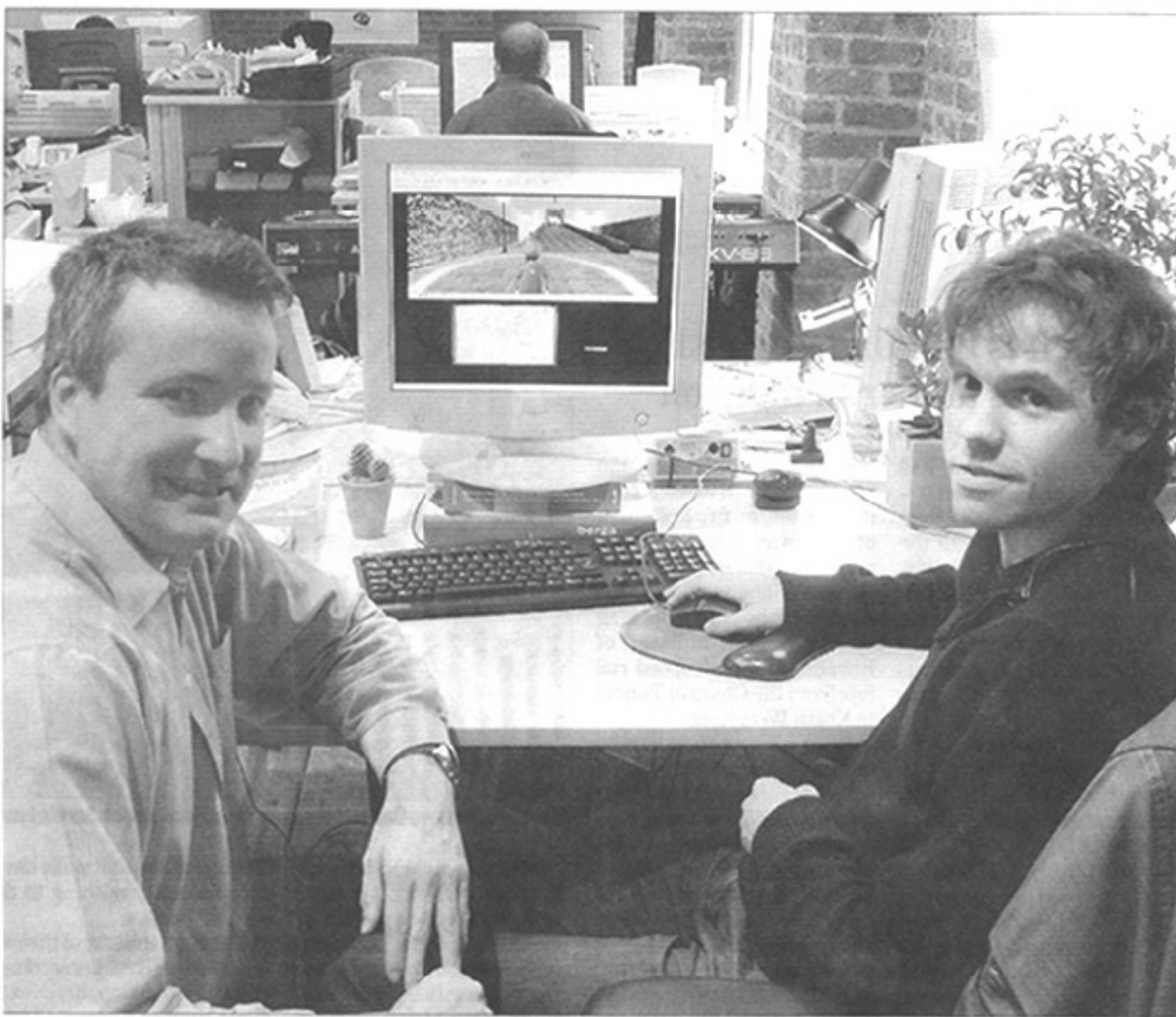
"We are going to look at doing this with a health professional there with the young person, and we are also going to look at leaving it on the net, and evaluate both," said Sharry.

"But this is a very strength-based model of questioning. It is about solutions and strengths, not asking people to think profoundly."

The project, called Personal Investigator, puts a teenager in the role of a detective and takes that person through role-playing scenarios, encouraging them to take notes and collect clues.

"Adolescents are interested in technology and multimedia, and we thought this might be how to engage young people," said Sharry. "Rather than approaching people directly, we thought it would be easier to engage them using a computer."

Though the health services



MediaLab Europe's John Sharry (left) and student David Coyle with the role playing game that aims to combat teen depression

HEALTHY WEBSITES

Safe sites for sound advice: www.vhi.ie

Contains plenty of reliable advice for the health conscious.

www.irishhealth.com
News and information on health in Ireland.

www.healthfinder.gov/
www.nhsdirect.co.uk

US and UK government run respectively, these sites have lists of reliable health information sites.

www.quackwatch.com

A site that lists and debunks every medical myth and quack therapy it can find.

www.bmj.com

The website of the *British Medical Journal*, a mine of information about health and medical policy

www.alternative-therapies.com

A peer-reviewed journal on alternative medicine

are endorsing and increasingly using web infrastructures and PC technologies in their work, there is still a serious danger of misinformation and physical damage involved in placing too much trust in web-based information sources.

"The benefits are that you reach lots of people who use the web first, before seeking face-to-face help," said Sharry. "The problem is the quality of information on the web is very unreliable."

One of the biggest dangers to patients is the practise of prescribing medicines to

patients over the internet. "Anyone can provide advice on the net," said Simon Mills, who is both a GP and a barrister. "There is no obstacle to setting up a website providing advice but, in this jurisdiction, it is illegal to prescribe medicines over the internet."

However, "if you are outside the jurisdiction and are not registered as an Irish medical practitioner, there is probably not much the Irish law can do."

"On the internet, it is very much a case of caveat emptor [let the buyer beware]," Mills added.