By Barbara H. Goldman

Internet Research in Negligence Law

The enormous expansion in access to information that the Internet has brought to the practice of law affects practitioners on both sides of the tort litigation and personal injury fields. Plaintiffs' lawyers and defense counsel alike have at their fingertips what was once confined to law schools and only the finest of libraries—and sometimes not even there. This article is a guide to just a few of them.

In the pre-suit phase, finding people and companies is now easy enough to make every lawyer a desktop detective. Almost anyone with a listed telephone number can be located using one of a multitude of directories, such as www.anywho.com. You may not know, though, that the same service will also provide the address that corresponds to a telephone number (use the "reverse look-up" function) or that you can find out what geographic location is served by an area code (try www.infospace.com). If you are looking for the headquarters of a public corporation, go to www.sec.gov and select "Search for Company Filings" to get its quarterly or annual reports. For nonpublic corporations, try the applicable state's corporations bureau; in Michigan, the address is www.cis.state.mi.us/bcs_corp/sr_corp.asp.

If you want to find, or find out about, a physician or other medical specialist, there are many choices. You can confirm a Michigan professional's license and view his or her complaint and discipline history at www.cis.state.mi.us/verify.htm. To determine if a doctor is certified in a given specialty, try www.ama-assn.org and pick "Patients," then "Doctor Finder." Note however, that you will have to search one state at a time. For additional information on an individual specialty, go to the American Board of Medical Specialties at www.abms.org, or search directly for the specialty board.

Perhaps the most significant recent change in tort practice has been the improved avail-ability of administrative agency materials. In Michigan, searching the Administrative Code used to require tediously combing through the indexes to a series of volumes and un-compiled supplements. Now, anyone can get the same information at www.michigan.gov/orr. It does, at times, take some ingenuity to determine which department is the right one to look at (pet shop regulations, for example, are under the Department of Agriculture and day care center licensing is listed under the Family Independence Agency), but it should require only a short time to locate the correct section.

Although the Code of Federal Regulations was always available through commercial services, the cost could mount quickly, especially for the novice. While finding your way through the code can still be challenging, at least now it is possible to do it for free. Go to www.gpoaccess.gov/cfr and click "Search Tips" for a guide. If you do a search, however, be prepared for a jumble of results, in no discernable order, especially if the subject is broad enough to be covered in more than one title of USC.

Almost every federal agency also has its own website with links to applicable regulations and, very likely, a wealth of other material. Drug information and recalls can be located via the Department of Health and Human Services (www.os.dhhs.gov), which also keeps many databases of disease and other statistics. The Consumer Product Safety Commission (www.cpsc.gov) has injury data and information on recalls back to 1973. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (www.nhtsa.dot.gov) also reports recalls, safety data, regulations, and research results. If a case involves any mode of moving people or products, look at the National Transportation Safety Board's website (www.ntsb.gov), which includes a database of highway, aviation, marine, haz-mat, and other accident information. The Department of Labor maintains a separate website for the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (www.osha.gov), with links to agency standards and interpretations and to the Federal Register.[1] If you need any other ideas, check the list of executive branch agencies at lcweb.loc.gov/global/executive/fed.html.

Research on local regulations, unfortunately, is still difficult. The venerable Building Operators and Code Administrators manual, for example, can be purchased online from many vendors, but it is not directly available. Some sections of it are incorporated in other sources, but there is no reliable guide. Likewise, city codes can be found online at www.municode.com, but may require a subscription for access to the text.

If you find yourself mystified by a subject, the Internet will almost always lead you to something that can help. For medical topics, there are many sources including dictionaries (www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/mplusdictionary.html is one) and a handy guide to abbreviations (www.pharma-lexicon.com). If your problem is deciphering cyber-speak, www.webopedia.com is one of several sites for technical jargon. For simple, and not-so-simple, machines and physics problems, try www.howstuffworks.com or go to an online encyclopedia like www.britannica.com or encarta.msn.com. Finally, you can always do a free-form search, for a guide to anything from aerospace engineering to zoonotic diseases.

These suggestions represent just some hors d'oeuvres at the feast that a computer and a dataport can put in your hands. If you don't know where to start, or when to stop, your local librarian will be glad to assist you. ◆

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FOOTNOTE

1. The Federal Register is available directly at www.archives.gov/federal_register/ and www.gpoaccess.gov/fr among other sites.