Questions about your health? Go ask Alice

By Elizabeth Michaelson
Contributing Writer
Shy or embarrassed students can now anonymously receive answers to medical or social questions from a new ColumbiaNet interactive health service called “Go Ask Alice.”

Students can log in at any of the University’s ColumbiaNet terminals and ask questions about anything from AIDS symptoms and alcohol problems to questions regarding stress management and where to meet people.

Go Ask Alice, which began at the beginning of September, provides extensively researched health information as well as the names and extensions of specific health services on campus.

Responses to questions are usually entered on the computer systems within a week and are posted indefinitely, according to Healthwise Health Educator Deborah Levine.

Levine said she hopes the response lag time will decrease soon.

Go Ask Alice also offers a private service through student electronic-mail (e-mail) accounts. Students can send a question to Alice through e-mail and the response will be sent directly back to the student instead of being posted on the system. Levine said Healthwise staff members hope this feature will allow them to reach students who generally would not ask about sex, drugs, and other potentially embarrassing topics.

“These are normal, ordinary questions that many people have,” Levine said. “Where else can stu-
dents ask, ‘How much masturbation is normal?’”

Alice provides information free of medical jargon about such things as sexually transmitted diseases, clean needles, and female orgasms.

Levine, who researches answers, said Go Ask Alice has been logged into 250 times and that the program currently receives an average of three questions a day.

“The response has been overwhelming,” Levine said. “We’ve had more questions than expected.”

Go Ask Alice was developed by David Millman, coordinator of research and development for Academic Information Systems, and Steve van Leeuwen, administrative assistant for Academic Information Systems. The program is based on a similar service offered at Cornell University.

van Leeuwen said he foresees further expansion throughout Columbia Net and expects Go Ask Alice to gain a wider audience.