

Doctors, patients and the search for the truth on the Internet

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ABSTRACT – The overnight availability of huge amounts of medical information from the Internet has dramatically affected patients and doctors, and has swiftly highlighted a pressing need to deal with the problem of assessing the validity of such information. A number of further issues arise from this, most notably the questionable practice of selling supposed ‘miracle cures’ via the Internet.

The introduction of measures that ensure the regulation of health-related websites has to be a priority for the health care profession. It is important not only to protect patients, and reduce the amount of doctors’ time that is wasted, but also to allow confidence to develop in the reputable sites that exist. Such sites can provide accurate and useful information and can help to assemble supportive health-related communities on-line; facets that could be of great benefit to both patients and doctors alike.

KEY WORDS: Internet, website, doctors, patients, information, miracle cures, cyberchondriacs, netdoctor, chatroom.

The Internet is transforming our lives, sometimes for the better and sometimes for ill, and the medical profession has certainly not escaped such Internet intrusion. Typing the word ‘health’ into Google’s online search engine produces a list of around 80,000,000 websites related to this word; even if narrowed to UK registered sites alone, the figure is still huge at around 2,500,000 matches. This illustrates the difficulty of trying to find useful information on the Internet without specialist health sites to search for specific complaints. Despite this, doctors and patients appear to be finding relevant health-related information in this electronic maze, without guidance from any recognised medical authority. Box 1 shows a number of websites commonly recommended by GPs.

An opinion poll¹ examining doctors’ use of the Internet found that 62% of GPs in England occasionally advised patients to look for health information on the Internet. This same poll showed that 24% of patients brought either ‘a lot’ or ‘some’ information to GP consultations that had been

found on the Internet. Sometimes this information maybe useful – particularly in those cases where the patient has an uncommon illness that the doctor has never previously examined – but at other times the information may be worth less than the paper on which it has been printed. Whatever the case, the doctor should certainly not feel intimidated by the patient’s research, or dismiss it out of hand without first looking at it.

The main problem for both doctor and patient alike, is that of knowing how reliable information from the Internet actually is, and how someone without a medical background can check its reliability. After all, it is easy enough for ‘cyberchondriacs’ to convince themselves that they have any number of fatal conditions if they scour the Internet for long enough. The problem arises because, in so many cases, the writer’s credentials are not outlined on the website; anyone can buy a web domain with a health-related name, and from such websites not only can misinformation be spread, but supposed ‘cures’ for illnesses can be sold (with a small print disclaimer regarding the cures’ actual effectiveness to protect the vendor from prosecution). People without the means to assess the validity of these claims may eventually find themselves no better off medically, and almost certainly out of pocket.

As in so many instances involving the Internet, it is vulnerable groups such as those suffering from medical problems who find themselves the victims of such deceptions. There is therefore an urgent need to put in place some form of regulation of medical websites. At present, the main factors standing in the way of such regulations are lack of time and funding

Box 1. Consumer healthcare websites recommended by GPs¹

NHSdirect	58%
BBC Online	29%
NetDoctor	18%
Embarrassing Problems	15%
Surgery Door	11%
Askyourpharmacist	8%
Healthinfocus	6%
Onhealth	3%
Other websites	13%

– who should be responsible for approving sites, and who should fund them?

Informing patients of the benefits and dangers of the Internet is something that has barely been touched upon by the medical profession. Ideally leaflets should be available in waiting rooms, listing reputable sites to refer to and outlining the possible pitfalls of Internet research. Yet again, the problem lies with funding and organising such leaflets.

But what about the benefits of using the Internet? Firstly, there *are* reputable people writing on the Internet, publishing real life stories and providing up-to-date information. As long as we can be satisfied that these people are adequately qualified to dispense advice, web-based data are no less valid than those provided by other media. Indeed, web-based information is often more up to date, as it does not suffer the inevitable and often considerable time lapse caused by the processes of traditional publishing methods.

Another way in which the Internet helps patients – and to some extent, where it may help doctors – is via chatrooms. A chatroom opens a forum for discussion between people with the same interests, be they aeroplane enthusiasts, lonely hearts, or sufferers of depression or asthma. Like-minded people can come together from around the world, and provide support groups for others with the same problems; there is no longer any need for patients to feel that they are isolated cases and that nobody understands their difficulties. Equally, a doctor can gain insight into patients' views of their illness by reading their postings in chatrooms.

Medical specialists undertaking research should find the Internet useful for yet another reason – many journals and reports are now published online, available to be read free of charge or for a small fee. Dedicated search engines can search for key words in a number of journals, and may identify research not written in standard bibliographies. Such websites are invariably run by, or with the support of, the organisations and publishers who originally published the work and, as such, the papers can be viewed with the same assurance as that of a traditional, printed version from that journal.

The information that we want is probably out there on the Internet. However, finding this information, and assessing its reliability, is not always the easiest of tasks.

References

- 1 Taylor Nelson Opinion Poll of 200 GPs commissioned for Netdoctor and Lundbeck Limited, June 2001