Health Information on the Internet

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Health Information on the Internet

Writing on how we have adapted to accessing and acquiring information using the Internet, a recent article in the *New Yorker* asks us to consider this conundrum: Had the first Harry Potter book *The Philosopher’s Stone* been published after rather than before the launch of Google, would the wizard-in-training be “Googling” for spells on a smart tablet rather than spending hours in the Hogwarts library searching for answers?1

The experience of a patient spellbound by health information gathered from the Internet arriving at a consultation is a familiar one. Responses to this situation vary, with only a few of us perceiving this as a challenge to our position. Most of us believe that it is the quality of the information that further influences the patient-physician relationship, the subsequent quality of care, and eventually health outcomes2. Prompted by such concerns about standards, many researchers have sought to quantify the quality of information on the Internet3. Not surprisingly, results have repeatedly shown that health information on the Net varies widely in accuracy and completeness, and in most instances, does not meet accepted standards of medical information as defined by the World Health Organisation Health on the Net (WHO-NET) standards4.

In a previous editorial in *The Journal* on this important subject, Deshpande and Jadad advised us that, like the public, we should move on and end our Byzantine discussions to measure health information on the Internet5. Not surprisingly, results have repeatedly shown that health information on the Net varies widely in accuracy and completeness, and in most instances, does not meet accepted standards of medical information as defined by the World Health Organisation Health on the Net (WHO-NET) standards4.

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non-Caucasian, and poorer, as well as having lower educational attainment. Americans living with a disability are also less likely to have Internet access, further adding to their burden of disadvantage. Sixty percent of those who do access the Internet seek information online for a medical disorder or problem. Not surprisingly, those with a chronic disorder are more likely to access medical information.

The most comprehensive survey of how Americans interrogate the Internet for health information is undertaken by the Pew Research Center and the most recent report, “The Social Life of Health Information,” was published in May 2011. Many of its findings have informed this editorial, but most salutary is the main conclusion that doctors and other health professionals remain the main and most important portal of choice for health information.

Few searching the Internet go directly to a medical portal or enter the websites of professional societies, but instead use a search engine. Despite this approach, most consumers find the correct answers to medical questions. Of the 5 conditions searched for most frequently on Web MD, 2 of them, gout and lupus, are within the domain of a rheumatologist. Eighty-six percent of users seeking drug information are more likely to want more detail on analgesics and corticosteroids, ranking among the top 5 questions on their health. Many of the respondents in this survey also found the Internet a valuable tool whether seeking a quick answer or attempting to gain a better understanding of treatment or drug options.

Despite concerns, there is little evidence that patients come to any harm from seeking information on the Internet, and as more people find they are helped rather than harmed, we need to embrace rather than shun seeking health information on the Internet. Singh advises that we need to respond to this “pop-up,” a phenomenon that is certainly here to stay, that cannot be blocked, and that would be a mistake for doctors to ignore.

REFERENCES


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