Health Care Web Sites: Are They Reliable?

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Locating reliable health care information on the World Wide Web is difficult and confusing. Thus, Internet users must choose the appropriate resources to guide their health care decisions. This paper will describe the “typical” Internet user. Then, it will compare the three most “comprehensive” web site guidelines. Finally, it will summarize what criteria are necessary to create and maintain reliable health care web sites.

KEY WORDS: health care information; Internet users; web site guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has given rise to an information revolution with increasing numbers of consumers gaining free access to an expanding volume of knowledge that previously was inaccessible. Seeking reliable and valid information is difficult because of the speed and lack of control with which data is accumulating. Furthermore, filtering through the information is often confusing and time consuming. Thus, searching and locating information are the starting points, after which Internet users must choose the appropriate resources to guide their health care decisions. Judging whether data is applicable and credible presents an even greater challenge than the actual search. Therefore, consumers must rely on Internet resources that review these health care web sites.(1)

With so many questions about the quality of online information, whom do health consumers trust? In addition, how reliable are the Internet resources that evaluate these health care web sites? This paper will describe “typical” Internet users and identify the problems they incur when searching online for health information. Then, it will compare and contrast the three most “comprehensive” web site guidelines and discuss what changes are needed to improve the reliability of health Internet information in the future.

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INTERNET USERS

The typical Internet user in the United States is 33 years old with an average yearly income of $59,000. This implies that wealthier households have better access to the Internet, and hence are more likely to be affected by unreliable or inaccurate health information. In reality, the problem with health care web sites is that the information affects all people regardless of income, age, sex, or race. Because of the inconsistent quality of online information, both typical and nontypical health consumers will continue to make ill-advised medical decisions, especially if their only source of information is based on Internet data. Several reports and studies provide statistical data on Internet usage regarding health issues. Two well-established organizations include the Pew Internet & American Life Project and the Harris Poll Survey.

Pew Internet & American Life Project

The mission of Pew Internet & American Life Project is to be an authoritative source for timely information on the Internet. A summary of their findings is found in the Online Health Care Revolution Report. This report explains that “health seekers” search for information in a haphazard way without any help or guidance from medical providers. Furthermore, health seekers tend to use broad search engines in which a high proportion of the information is neither the most current nor most relevant for their specific health needs.

In 2000, the Online Health Care Revolution Report stated that 55% of U.S. Internet users (or 52 million American adults) utilize the Internet to access health and medical information for themselves or others. The report also stated that 41% of users said online materials influenced their decisions about specific treatments of care. In addition, 89% of users said they were concerned that Internet companies would sell or share their personal demographics data, while 86% were concerned about inaccurate information from unreliable web sites. As a result of these worries, 63% of users who looked up medical information online oppose placing medical records on the Internet. Finally, 9% of users said they regularly converse with physicians through e-mail, and 2% go online in lieu of seeing a doctor.

Pew Internet & American Life Project summarizes 11 major findings regarding health care web site usage. These results indicate that the Internet influences health seekers in the following ways: 1) It strongly influences health seekers and directly effects their medical decisions; 2) it impacts consumers because these health seekers are easily swayed by what they read online; 3) it is a tool for sickly persons rather than as an educational resource for those who want to remain healthy; 4) it is used for research and reference purposes more than for interaction with providers or purchasing medicine; 5) it is a tool for people who are currently ill or seeking help for ailing family members and friends; 6) it allows easy access to second opinions and additional information about immediate medical problems; 7) it provides convenience for health seekers because they can gather information 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and still maintain anonymity; 8) it stimulates high anxiety among health seekers who fear privacy violations especially in regards to insurance companies and employers;