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Stop The World wide web I Want To Get Off.

Presented at: Medicine 2.0 Congress. <http://www.medicine20congress.com/>

Proceedings published in Journal of Medical Internet Research (JMIR)
<http://www.jmir.org/2008/3/e22/>

Abstract

Background

Increasing number of patients are using the Internet for health information (National Statistics 2007). Traditionally professionals have been the information gatekeepers; key questions were around what information patients should be given. Reviews of information on the Internet have been focused towards analysing the quality of information e.g. Eysenbach et al [1] and Breckons et a 2008[2]

Whilst this debate is important patients do not always want this professional centric world and are quietly seizing the agenda. If the professionals are not giving them the information they want, they are going and finding it for themselves.

Neither patients nor professionals however yet understand enough about the new options that the Internet affords to be able to develop a shared understanding of how to make best use of it. Web 1.0 brought debate around the quality of the information made available.

Web 2.0 however brings the additional complexity of knowing where the information is before it can be questioned. One weakness of some research into health information on the Internet is that a quite common research method is to carry out searches and then analyse the top results (e.g. Biddle et al[3]), which tends to exclude information from Web 2.0 sites.

Objective

Healthcare professionals are one of the main sources of information for patients; their knowledge of information sources will affect their ability to support their patients. The objective of this research was to explore professionals' use of the Internet for patient information.

Methods

A questionnaire was distributed to healthcare professionals attending CPD sessions at an English university. Participation was voluntary, and students assured that this did not affect the session they were attending. The researcher was not involved with the session.

Results.

In total there were 51 completed the questionnaires. 71% of respondents were nurses. The majority (94%) thought the Internet was a good source of health information. Their use of the Internet was however limited. Most (85%) often used email, far fewer often used instant messaging (29%) or discussion boards (20%). Only 23% reported having an Athens account, the Health Service system for accessing online journals.

Few (18%) would usually recommend a website to patients, 33% would never do so. Even less, 8% would usually recommend an online support group, over half (57%) would never do so. Not only were these professionals not recommending the Internet to their patients, they were not using it to locate patient information themselves. Only 16% said they usually used websites that allowed them to create tailored information leaflets for their patients, 32% never using these sites.

Conclusion

Although these healthcare professionals thought the Internet was a good source of health information this belief was not matched by their actions. Less than one third usually recommended the Internet to their patients, more never did so. Nor were they using the

Internet to meet their own information needs. Healthcare professionals education needs to include the Internet as a patient information source so that they are able to advise and support their patients.