Chapter 1.7
Discussing Health Issues on the Internet

Jane Moon
Monash University, Australia

INTRODUCTION

This article provides an overview of the trend in Internet usage; in particular, the trend that relates particularly to health-information-seeking behavior. It discusses a paradigm shift in patient-doctor relationships that has resulted from social changes; that is, lack of consultation time, thirst for medical knowledge, mass-media medical information and an explosion in the number of health Web sites. The Internet has become an important medium for bridging the gap in the patient-doctor relationship.

Issues of Internet quality are explored. While the Internet can help consumers by providing immediate feedback as far as treatment and medication are concerned, without proper standards and quality assurance it can give rise to diabolical consequences (Crocco, Villasis-Keever, & Jadad, 2002). Ciolek describes information on the Internet as mediocre and argues that health information on the Internet is subject to "Multi Media Mediocrity" (MMM) (Ciolek, 1997).

General Trends of Using Internet for Health Advice

The Internet has become a vital tool for individuals, families, the health profession and the health industry. One Web site reports that there are more than 10,000 health sites on the Internet, and others report more than 100,000 health-related Web sites (Eysenbach, Sa, & Diepgen, 1999). No one knows theexact number, but what is clear is that there are numerous health sites available.

Health sites vary, from academic sites to health-provider institutions and government sites. Recently, there have been an increasing number of pharmaceutical companies disseminating information or selling products and services in a variety of ways on Web sites luring consumers (Risk & Dzenowagis, 2001).

Since the emergence of the Internet in 1991, the Internet use has grown exponentially. A recent survey shows that 86% of the 168 million American adults have visited health Web sites, compared with 55% of the 60 million in Germany. Ninety percent of American primary-care physi-

cians have used the Internet (Risk & Dzenowagis, 2001). According to Harris Interactive consulting firm, health Internet users grew steadily from 50 million in 1998 to 69 million in 1999, 97 million in 2001 and 110 million in 2002 (Harris Interactive, 2000).

Demographical Difference

No significant difference in information-seeking habits between different age groups were found (Brodie, Flournay, Altman, Blendon, Benson, & Rosenbaum, 2000) Also, there is a direct correlation between computer usage and access to health information:

Once people gain access to the Internet, its use at home to get health information is similar across income, education, race and age. Therefore, the number of persons using the Internet to access health information should rise along with computer use. (Brodie, 2000, p.262)

According to Brodie's report, gender, age and background do not make much difference in Internet search behavior.

A significant difference between countries is noted in research results from a questionnaire survey among the users of a dermatology atlas Web site. Pictures were used to minimize language barriers between countries (Eysenbach et al., 1999). The survey was conducted over seven months, from July 1998 to February 1999, and was answered by 6,441 users from all over the world.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the 4,605 users who completed survey from the eight countries that showed the highest absolute numbers of users. Of those eight, Canada shows the highest percentage of users, followed by the United States (U.S.) and United Kingdom (UK), with Brazil the lowest.

There was a high proportion of general practitioners in Canada, UK, Spain and Sweden, and a high proportion of specialists in Brazil, France, Germany, Spain and U.S.

Figure 1. User profile of dermatology atlas Web site intended for health professional