

QUALITY MATTERS: ADOPTING QUALITY CRITERIA FOR HEALTH WEBSITES

'Safe' Information for patients

"Studies prove that up to 80% of the information provided on the Internet is either incomplete, outdated or simply wrong" declared Dr. Günther Eysenbach at the European Health Forum Gastein 2000 on 'Information and Communication in Health' today. He is the leader of the research group for cyber-medicine at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. Access to information for anyone may well mean 'patient empowerment', enabling the patient to make informed choices and to take a more responsible role for their health. The quality of informed choices, however, depends on the quality of information on which decisions are taken.

Censorship vs. self-control

In principle, there are two ways of controlling quality. Information to be published could be restricted by law. Given the trans-border nature of the internet and lack of control over the provision and use of information, this approach is not very practicable. Moreover, it is questionable, whether it is desirable in democratic societies.

An alternative is self-restriction. Information providers can commit themselves to quality and have the quality of the information they provide assessed by third parties. If quality criteria are established and controlled by truly independent parties, they could provide a reliable basis for consumers to decide which information to trust.

Quality criteria

A number of organisations such as the Swiss Health on the Net Foundation (<http://www.hon.ch>) and the US-based Internet Healthcare Coalition have established lists of quality criteria for Websites. Main criteria identified include:

- Authority: Advice is only to be made by qualified professionals, unless otherwise stated;
- Complementarity: information is designed to support rather than replace medical advice;
- Confidentiality must be granted;
- Attribution: Information needs to be supported by clear references to source data;
- Justifiability: Claims relating to outcomes of a treatment need to be supported by appropriate and balanced evidence;
- Transparency: Contact details need to be given for contact and further information and financial interests and sponsorship needs to be clearly indicated, including a description the advertising policy;

Other relevant criteria include clear and understandable language, provision of technologies supporting special needs of users (e.g. audio channels), date of publication, review and changes; and a description of how the content is developed.

Objectives of control

In the long run, good quality of information on the Internet is not only in the interest of consumers, but also at the benefit of information providers. Providing consumers with quality information can reduce anxiety and promote more effective relationships with health professionals. Well-informed consumers are expected to have improved health outcomes and an understanding of treatment choices has been shown to have a positive impact on the health status independent of participation in the decision-making process.

EU action

In order to ensure good quality of health information on the Internet, the European Commission is supporting projects aiming at establishing good practice and disseminating Codes of Conduct. Also, the World Health Organisation has started reflecting on how quality could be assessed and good quality sites could be labelled.

One of the projects funded by the European Commission in this area is MedCertain (<http://www.medcertain.org>): MedPICS Certification of Trustworthy and Assessed Health Information on the Net. This decentralised system will be based on the co-operation of individual organisations that evaluate, assess, accredit or recommend health information on the Internet. A fully functional self- and third-party rating system will be established to enable customers to select information. Backed by a global technical and organisational infrastructure, trusted medical societies, consumer organisations, libraries, medical experts and responsible health information providers will co-operate in disseminating and advocating best practice guidelines for eHealth providers. The system will as well educate users to distinguish good quality.

Discern is a set of quality criteria initially developed for written consumer health information on treatment choices. An internet version of the instrument is under development. The tool consists of 15 questions representing separate quality criteria, plus an overall quality rating which is an intuitive summary of answers. Having answered these questions, the reader can select and reject information or highlight its weaknesses.

Responsible for the content: International Forum Gastein