

# Information at your fingertips

*Dr Angie Hart, Principal Lecturer, Dr Flis Henwood, Reader, & Dr Sally Wyatt, Reader, examine the internet and health...*

In recent years, there has certainly been an increase in the use of the internet in relation to health. More patients and more healthcare practitioners are using it to find out about health conditions, and to help them decide on the best treatment options. And some studies have shown that people with rare conditions have found the internet particularly useful, both as a source of health information and as a way of helping them get in touch with other people in similar situations.

This article is mainly about patients' use of the internet. Broadly speaking, there are two main approaches to thinking about the consequences of patients using the internet. Optimists argue that patients will be empowered by doing so and that having information from the internet at their fingertips will help patients come to a decision about their health difficulties, and to be on a more equal footing with healthcare practitioners. Pessimists suggest that patients will be overwhelmed by the volume of information they download, and that they won't understand whether or not it is accurate and reliable.

Our research study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Medical Research Council, aimed to get behind these debates to look at what happens in real life. We explored how a group of around 50 mid-life patients, some women and some men, actually used the internet in their daily lives. We then asked healthcare practitioners what they thought about their patients using the internet. Our study was about the use of the internet by patients with quite common health conditions.

## Patients' use of the internet

One of our main findings was that, although patients were well aware of the hype around internet use, few actually used the internet to find out about their health condition. Most relied far more on their healthcare practitioner, friends, relatives and the mass media. In fact, our research confirms the view that, despite the negative publicity some health practitioners have received of late, for example, the Shipman case and the Bristol enquiry, trust in them remains very high. Most patient participants mentioned that they would go to a known healthcare practitioner first to discuss a health issue, rather than use any other source, including those to be found on the internet. For example, Jenny told us: "I do trust

dispensers, chemists, doctors. The medical profession. Basically professionals. That's where my basic trust is."

Very few patients indeed made negative comments about health practitioners as information providers. As a result of this high level of trust, many patients did not feel the need to access alternative, or even complementary, sources of information such as that acquired on the internet.

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However, there are other reasons for patients not using the internet. Because of the way their household was organised, some just couldn't get to the computer, even if they had one. For example, one woman told us: 'I've had a teenage son around for years who has been hogging the internet and he won't show me how to use it because I'm too slow. He's actually just gone to university so I have been trying to get it up and running, and sort it out but it's in such a mess.... The thing is, I turn it on and it takes 20 minutes to crank up...because he's put so much junk on there, as they do, screensavers and this bit and that bit'

Others, like Peter, simply weren't attracted to using computers: 'I don't use it. I can't be bothered. ...I should use the computer more, I just, I don't know, I just can't be bothered. I'm lazy about that. It's not my sort of thing. I'd rather pick up a phone and talk to somebody.'

A further group of patients in our study clearly felt they should be using the internet to look up health information. However, they recognised that they had very poor IT literary skills and this hampered their ability to do so. Such participants found it difficult enough to surf the web for information about holidays and shopping, let alone visit health information sites. These were often perceived as hard

to find and as giving complex, and sometimes contradictory, advice. Roger was clearly overwhelmed when he told us about his attempts to use the internet: 'There's pages and pages. Some of it was just irrelevant...it was stuff that I didn't really want to know. I suppose doctors and surgeons...would want to know that but it was well beyond me. ...It [felt like a problem] because of not being familiar with PCs and how to get into them.'

### What about those who did use the internet?

Only a fairly small minority of our participants actually used the internet to find out about health issues on anything like a regular basis. Using other people – friends, partners, librarians – to look things up on the internet by proxy was, however, fairly popular.

For those few who looked up health information themselves, the NHS was certainly considered a reliable brand name by some, and consequently, a reliable first port of call. However, not all participants agreed. Janet, for example, described her web search strategy: 'I go straight to a search engine and put in some terms, and in that way, then you get the mix of sources that you might want to go for. You're not just targeting medical journals, for example...I know what the conventional thinking is, which is that something in the British Medical Journal or something is meant to be reliable – its backed-up by conventional research. Then the other me says 'that's funded by pharmaceutical companies, they've got an axe to grind, they know what they want and there are other natural things that you can do' and so I don't consider either more reliable. I consider all of it.'

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Sometimes, patients might look things up as an additional information strategy, but they would still revert to the authority of their health professional. Ashok told us: "I do look things up but I don't give much importance or credence to any outside material, except for from the doctors.' Others would not actually tell their health professional that they had looked up information. This was often for fear of being seen to be trying to undermine medical authority."

### What did healthcare professionals think about patients using the internet?

We found that health professionals had quite mixed reactions to patients using the internet. However, broadly speaking, they fitted quite neatly into the optimistic and pessimistic views introduced at the beginning of this article. Healthcare

professionals, with more experience of the internet themselves, seemed less likely to be fazed by patients coming to consultations with information they had looked up on the internet. One doctor felt that the internet could be seen as a catalyst for quite a radical change in the way healthcare professionals worked: 'It's something about our role changing and it's something about our role becoming the processors of information, rather than the providers of information.'

### Conclusion

Despite all the hype around about health and the internet, we still don't know that much about how patients actually use the internet to help make decisions about their health. Ours was a small-scale study and so we can't say that our findings apply to the population at large. However, it does give us a window into what people seem to be doing in real life.

Our study shows that there may be some truth in the idea that the relationship between health and the internet is more hype than substance. Also, when the internet is used, it tends to complement, rather than replace, other means of finding health information. Just because people can and do find health information online does not mean they stop reading books and leaflets, paying attention to mass media, or talking to healthcare professionals, friends and family.

There is clearly a need for help with improving IT skills – not just for patients but for health professionals too. And despite all the technological advances we have seen in recent years, our research gives a clear message. It seems that, when we're really under the weather, many of us seem to want to find a trusted healthcare practitioner, rather than a computer, at our very first port of call.

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