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Description and management of a new syndrome – patients corroborating what their health professional has said by checking on the Internet.

In issue 13, February 2000, of this newsletter <<http://www.rsm.ac.uk/hii/toc13.htm>>, I wrote about the Internet Printout Syndrome. It was in response to a 'syndrome' that I had witnessed myself. I was describing a scenario where a doctor during a consultation was presented with a substantial wad of printed material generated from the Internet. The purpose of my article was to support the many colleagues who felt overwhelmed by these printouts and to help them manage this 'condition' and deal with it appropriately.

However, the media picked up this article and it appeared in several news outlets. It seemed to capture their imagination and I was asked to do a number of interviews. So, two years on, it is with interest that I revisit this subject and see what has happened since then.

From a personal point of view, in my everyday practice, I do not see this syndrome often – in fact it is quite rare. I am surprised that it is not more common. However, I do see a variation of the Internet Printout Syndrome and, tongue in cheek, I shall call it the Internet Checking Syndrome!

I am often impressed how many times patients (or a relative/friend on their behalf) have admitted that they have checked the information given by me during a consultation with that on the Internet. Now this is often either to corroborate what they have been told by me or another health professional, or simply trying to obtain more information about their condition.

Personally, I like the idea of an empowered patient going online and discovering more about their medical problem. After all, the face-to-face consultation is short, the patient may not always be able to ask all the questions they want to, and they only hear one opinion. Going online means

that they can see and digest the information when it suits them, there is a multiplicity of sources in cyberspace to interrogate and via a printout they can keep a permanent record of the information. Of course going online does mean that the patient can be confused by the sheer volume of

printouts to the consultation then encourage them to be selective and not to overwhelm you or themselves. If they want to check out information online, then be prepared to suggest appropriate Web sites. Now, of course, this depends on what is wrong with them; in the UK, I would

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information, the probable contradictions and the problems of seeking good quality and impartial information. However, some of these problems have always existed with printed material except they are less available, whilst online information can just be a few clicks away.

It is difficult to know how many patients actually go online to check what their health professional has told them. I guess it is probably quite common, but many patients will not want to admit to questioning their usual health care provider. This is a shame as I feel that the Internet is here to stay and when used properly is a powerful adjunct to good quality healthcare.

An excellent article that I came across was published at <<http://www.fergusonreport.com/articles/fr00801.htm>>. It quotes survey results on people who go online and it showed that 88% found material that they considered to have a positive effect on their health. Just over a third actually discussed Internet-derived information with their health professional and, surprisingly, there was a minimal divergence of opinion. It is worth checking out the rest of this site, as it comes from that superb commentator on the Internet health scene, Tom Ferguson.

So what should we advise our patients? Well, if they want to bring

suggest NHS Direct Online <<http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk>> simply because of the large volume of material that is there, it is written for a UK-based patient, and it carries the brand name and trustworthiness of the NHS. Another port of call can be the Web site of a self-help organisation (a good starting point is <<http://www.patient.co.uk/selfhelp/index.htm>> or <<http://www.ukselfhelp.info>>). If there is an issue about determining the quality of information found, then I suggest using the excellent Discern instrument at <http://www.discern.org.uk/discern_instrument.htm>.

Hopefully, the Internet Checking Syndrome will be a benign condition, which will contribute to the patient's understanding of the problem they face. If faced with a large number of printouts, don't be fazed – ask them to summarise the problem, identify areas of confusion and differences of opinion, and, if necessary, refer them to appropriate Web sites. If, indeed, you find that as a health professional you have given wrong advice or information, then admit it. We are all learning and we can all learn from each other. Be aware of the Internet Checking Syndrome and don't feel undermined by it – accept it as an integral part of the healthcare process.

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