



BOOKMARKS: Gateways to health information on the Internet: self-help for the consumer?

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A comparison of three health information gateways aimed at the health consumer.

This column will explore some of the information sites aimed at consumers of health care. There are many such sites available on the Internet of both a general and specialised nature. The sites that are focused on here, **NHS Direct Online** <<http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk>>, **MEDLINEplus** <<http://medlineplus.gov>> and **Patient UK** <<http://www.patient.co.uk>>, all act as general stores of, or gateways to, health information.

MEDLINEplus

This site is provided by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) in the US. As with all the sites considered in this column, it is free to access and does not require any other sort of registration to use. It acts as a gateway to other sites as well as using content provided by the NLM and the National Institutes for Health. The site is broken down into seven areas: Health Topics, Drug Information, Dictionary, Encyclopaedia, Other Resources, Directory, News. Health Topics <<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/healthtopics.html>> contains a comprehensive index system allowing various routes into the information core for the user. However, the breadth of subjects covered within the site means that there is often a further sub-index to be navigated depending upon the route chosen. Understandably, the focus of the site is American. Depending upon the particular topic, one of the links is to a patient flow chart which enables the consumer to decide upon a course of action, e.g. the section on neck pain includes this link <<http://familydoctor.org/flowcharts/513.html>>.

Two prominent sites that deal with UK-focused information and

advice are **NHS Direct Online** and **Patient UK**.

NHS Direct Online

Content within **NHS Direct Online** is organised within three areas: an encyclopaedia, a collection of self-help guides and a directory of local health services. It seems that the consumer is intended to access the site through the home page due to its frame-based nature. The self-help guides aim to guide the consumer to the appropriate professional help. These guides appear to come in two guises: one a pathway where the user is asked a series of yes/no questions with the resulting advice being delivered at the end of the pathway; the other a short fact sheet about the illness. It is not clear to the user before clicking on the link which type of guide is being accessed. Interestingly, the 'Body' index doesn't include the full range of conditions listed under the alphabetical index; its links appear to be to the pathway guides. Disappointingly, there seems to be little cross-linkage within the site, e.g. the self-help guide to alopecia does not point the user to the encyclopaedia entry for alopecia; there is a cross-link from within the endometriosis self-help guide but it results in a 404 error.

Patient UK

Patient UK is a site developed by two north-east GPs in association with EMIS. As well as a directory of UK Web sites and details of self-help/patient support groups, it contains a directory of over 500 information leaflets <<http://www.patient.co.uk/pils.asp>>. These leaflets can be accessed either alphabetically or by body category. The index also lists the most requested leaflets. The leaflets are Prodigy validated

<<http://www.prodigy.nhs.uk>> and helpfully contain links to related information. The other areas on the site also show the same thought to organisation, with alphabetical, category and 'most requested' indexes. However, the site does not offer any self-help flow charts.

Content-wise, the three sites seem to offer similar services.

How do the individual designs compare?

The site which has the 'simplest' feel about it is the Patient UK site. It has few graphics, a simple colour scheme, and has a consistent structure across the site. Importantly, it is not frame-based, allowing direct linking to internal URLs such as individual information leaflets. This is in contrast to NHS Direct Online which is frame-based. The right and left border menu system makes site navigation a little confusing as well giving a 'cluttered' feeling overall. The apparent lack of cross-linkage within the site has been noted. These are a very prominent part of the usability of MEDLINEplus and Patient UK. MEDLINEplus also contains few graphics, but the topic pages do have a number of links and menus which can contribute to a cluttered impression. It is the most usable, as the site is well organised and comprehensive with all topic information being linked to from the same topic home page, unlike NHS Direct Online. For the UK health consumer, however, its American focus is a drawback. Both NHS Direct Online and MEDLINEplus open external links in separate windows, thus making it clear to the user when they are leaving the site.