He@lth Information on the Internet

Current literature

Betsy Anagnostelis
Librarian, Royal Free Hospital Medical Library, University College London   ucylbet@ucl.ac.uk

An annotated bibliography of articles relevant to the study and use of the
Internet in the healthcare environment.

Christensen H *et al*. Delivering interventions for depression by using the Internet: randomised controlled trial. *BMJ* 2004**; 328**: 265
<http://bmj.bmjjournals.com/cgi/content/abstract/328/7434/265>
This paper reports the results of a randomised controlled trial that evaluated the efficacy of two Internet interventions for users in the community in Canberra, Australia with symptoms of depression, as compared with a control intervention. Those randomised to the trial had higher scores on the Kessler psychological distress scale (22 or above), had access to the Internet and were not receiving clinical care from a psychologist or psychiatrist. The first of the Web sites was a psycho-education site offering evidence-based information about depression and its treatment (BluePages <http://bluepages.anu.edu.au/>); the second was an interactive site offering cognitive behaviour therapy for the prevention of depression (MoodGYM <http://moodgym.anu.edu.au/>). Use of the sites was directed through lay interviewers. Participants were contacted weekly by telephone; they also received guides to navigation and weekly assignments over a period of 5 weeks, with revision of the programmes taking place in the sixth week. Participants receiving the control intervention were also contacted weekly by telephone and discussions were held about life-style and environmental factors relevant to depression. Both Web sites were found to be effective in reducing symptoms of depression. BluePages significantly improved knowledge of evidence-based treatment options, whereas MoodGYM significantly reduced dysfunctional thinking. The authors note that the participants were highly educated and recruited in the community (rather than general practice). They conclude that the findings of the study may be relevant to a subset of patients from general practice.

Klemm P *et al*. Online cancer support groups: a review of the research literature. *Comput Inform Nurs* 2003**; 21**: 136–142
The authors undertook a review of the literature, based on searches of CINAHL, Medline and PsycINFO, to retrieve articles about Internet cancer support groups (ICSGs) that included adult cancer patients or their carers. Of 171 potential references, 118 were evaluated as full text articles and 9 met the inclusion criteria, describing 10 separate studies. The studies indicated that ICSGs helped people cope more effectively with their disease, but their results were not generalisable: the majority were pilot studies, used small samples, and predominantly involved Caucasian women with breast cancer; none of the studies used randomisation or control groups. The authors found that information seeking and giving or receiving support were of greatest interest to participants in ICSGs. Gender differences were identified: men were more likely to participate in ICSGs than in face-to-face support groups and were generally more interested in gaining information about their disease. Questions about the accuracy of some information found on ICSGs and a possible link between depression rates and the use of ICSGs raised concerns. The authors discuss possible barriers to the use of ICSGs (age, educational level, computer experience, cost, language, visual impairment) and recommend that large randomised controlled trials are undertaken to demonstrate the efficacy of ICSGs.

Ziebland S *et al*. How the Internet affects patients' experience of cancer: a qualitative study. *BMJ* 2004**; 328**: 564
<http://bmj.bmjjournals.com/cgi/content/abstract/328/7439/564>
In a qualitative study using semistructured narrative interviews by maximum variation sampling collected for the DIPEx charity, the authors explored how patients with one of five cancers talked about their use of the Internet. Privacy, 24-h availability, obviation of the need for face-to-face or telephone interactions (particularly among young men) and the ability to search for information as and when needed were the main characteristics identified as appealing by patients seeking health information on the Internet. Lack of home access and non-familiarity with computers were given as the main reasons for non-use. The study discusses the many different ways in which cancer patients use the Internet throughout all stages of their disease. It also highlights two important ways in which use of the Internet helps to transform patients' experience of cancer: first, by allowing them to undertake covert questioning of all interactions with health professionals, from diagnosis to follow up; and, second, by enabling them to demonstrate competence through gaining in depth knowledge and expertise about their disease. Any concerns about the quality of information found on the Internet were expressed as concern for others who may not have developed strategies to avoid being misled.

Fung CH *et al*. Controversies and legal issues of prescribing and dispensing medications using the Internet. *Mayo Clin Proc* 2004**; 79**: 188–194
The authors undertook a literature review from Medline, LexisNexis and the ISI Web of Science databases. Of 208 references that met the inclusion criteria, 139 were found to contain pertinent information and were used to define a taxonomy of types of online pharmacies and to establish ethical and legal issues relating to their use. Possible benefits and major controversies were identified.