

Innovations on Patient UK

Dr Tim Kenny

Lead Author and Editor of Patient UK, and GP in Tyneside

tkenny101@btconnect.com

The content comprises: patient information leaflets (PILS), a national self-help and support group database, and drug information leaflets (DILS).

Patient UK <www.patient.co.uk> has provided online health information since 1997. Possibly one of the reasons it is popular is that the core content is the same as that which is included on the computer systems of most GPs. This content comprises: patient information leaflets (PILS) on a large number of conditions, a national self-help and support group database, and drug information leaflets (DILS). Additionally, the PILS are those used by PRODIGY – a national clinical decision support system <www.prodigy.nhs.uk>. Therefore, GPs and other health care staff are familiar with the content, and many recommend the site to their patients. What are the recent innovations on the site?

PatientPlus

PatientPlus has been available since 2004. This is an online medical textbook. Although primarily written for health professionals, some patients find the detail in these articles to be complementary to the PILS which are specifically aimed at the general public.

Patient Experience

In 2005, this facility was provided for patients to submit comments about their own experience of health, disease and medication. These are linked to the relevant PIL, DIL or PatientPlus article. For hundreds of conditions, there are now fascinating insights into how patients react, cope and deal with their conditions and medication. The aim is not for patients to ask questions – indeed, it is stated that questions will not be answered by anyone from the site – but as a means of passing on useful points that may be of benefit to other people.

Audio

Patient UK recently started to offer a number of PILS in audio format. These can be listened to online, downloaded or podcast. Although mainly aimed at

poor readers and people with vision impairment, it also offers an option for health professionals to place some useful information onto the MP3 players that seem to live in the ears of many younger patients who prefer to listen rather than to read! The number of audio files is limited at present, but now the teething troubles are past, should rise quickly.

EMIS access

EMIS access is a facility where patients can book appointments with their GP and order repeat prescriptions online. (Many GP surgeries offer this facility.) It is not part of the Patient UK Web site *per se*, but Patient UK is unique in that it is the only health site to link into this facility. EMIS is the company that provides software to more than half of GPs, and provides the technical know-how to run Patient UK. EMIS Access is another of their sites.

Guidelines database

Links to over 1000 clinical guidelines produced in the UK and available online – from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN), *etc.* – have been collated into a database and will be added to Patient UK by March 2006. Although guidelines are aimed at health professionals, many patients now seek more in-depth information about their conditions. This facility on Patient UK will hopefully help people to quickly find more in-depth information provided by guidelines.

Poems and stories

A facility has recently been launched that invites people to submit poems and short stories about health. The target audience is children aged 6–12 years and the poems and stories aim to help them understand more about certain health problems. This is an

experiment, and it is too early yet to assess how well this will take off.

The unique search facility

A search term submitted on Patient UK is processed conceptually rather than by keyword. Each article or entry on the site – each PIL, DIL, guideline link, *etc.* – is allocated to one or more medical concepts within a hierarchical tree. Where synonyms exist for the concept then they too are allocated to the concept. So, for example, one cascade down the tree is Endocrinopathy → Thyroid disorders → Hypothyroidism → Primary hypothyroidism → Congenital hypothyroidism. However, a synonym for hypothyroidism is myxoedema. Therefore, if you search for myxoedema you will be offered all articles linked to the concept ‘hypothyroidism’ even if the articles do not contain the word myxoedema. You are offered a PIL called ‘Underactive Thyroid’, patient experiences about hypothyroidism, details of the patient group the ‘British Thyroid Foundation’, various PatientPlus articles, *etc.* And if you really did want to search the site by keyword – Google will do that for you anyway!

But what about the quality of the information? As a minimum, all articles are peer reviewed and contain recent references to justify the clinical content. The flagship content, the PILS, are written in plain English by a GP who specialises in writing about patient information. In addition, all PILS that are used by Prodigy (about half go through the same rigorous validation process as the Prodigy guidances themselves. This includes the leaflets being critically read and commented on by doctors, other health professionals, and patient groups. Users can be confident that quality and accuracy of the information continues to be a major priority to the team at Patient UK.