He@lth Information on the Internet

Bookmarks: web blocking – giving Big Brother a run for his money

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Problems with the use of standard web blocker software in the NHS – policies vary between Trusts.

We hear about all sorts of new developments on the web such as Web 2.0 or Wikis, but what do we do if our Trust IT policies mean that we are not allowed to look at them? What do we do if we are searching for information on sexual health, obstetrics or even sports injuries and find that we are blocked access to these sites because they are deemed inappropriate?

Web security has been an issue since the development of the internet. Every day, the newspapers give us another scare story about the internet and, quite rightly, we have concerns about the dangers that the internet can bring – particularly with children. Who of us have not attempted to block certain inappropriate sites to protect our families? In the NHS, security is a major issue as we have to protect patient data, maintain confidentiality and show that we work in a secure environment. This can lead to conflict as many of our websites are about parts of the anatomy and the terms used can make the successful use of a standard web blocker almost impossible. The use of resources such as Websense in the NHS are being used to protect staff and networks by blocking any web-based materials that are considered inappropriate. The problem is, who decides what is appropriate?

I recently raised this issue for NHS librarians on Lis-Medical <www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/lis-medical.html> and had a number of very interesting replies. Indeed, I felt that I had walked into a hornets' nest whilst simultaneously opening a can of worms. The frustration and anger of NHS librarians was quite overwhelming and this issue seemed to be a perennial problem. I had wrongly assumed that the problems that I was experiencing were standard in the NHS and was surprised to find there were so many differences from Trust to Trust. I had foolishly imagined that there was a national standard as we all work for the same NHS. I found that Connecting for Health has actually handed over

security to individual Trusts – meaning that security is being implemented in many different ways. The poblem here is that this approach can lead to extremes, with some Trusts taking a very hard line. Interestingly – and don't try this at home – two Trust librarians told me that they had set up their own machines in their library to enable access to resources that had been banned by the IT department. Another told me that their own web catalogue had been blocked, another that Cochrane Library was blocked. And if you are getting desperate, the Samaritans website was blocked as 'leisure activities'!

It was commendable that almost every librarian who replied could see the problem that IT staff had. It is not just about inappropriate materials, as many of the sites bring problems of viruses and spy ware – a lot of this is about control. Some staff will look at inappropriate materials when they have the opportunity, but why do the actions of a minority spoil it for the rest of us? Is blocking and security just a convenient excuse to control what staff do and how they spend their work time? The danger is that the easiest option must be 'when in doubt, block it' as IT staff don't want to spend their entire day dealing with problems that the internet gives. But some of the reasons for blocking sites leave Trusts open to serious criticism – for instance, sites on HIV/AIDS have been blocked as having 'gay or lesbian content'.

A lot of the issues of web blocking relate to censorship. When I was managing a medical library, we kept standard sexual health and counselling books. We did not feel that it was our place to ban access to these resources and we knew the difference between this and pornography. We even had a copy of *The Joy of Sex*, which was extremely popular with the junior doctors, but we never considered hiding these books away. The negative view of the internet is in danger of overshadowing common sense and

hardworking, intelligent staff are being treated as children. If I was caught reading the latest copy of *Playboy* at work, my managers would be right to discipline me, even sack me, but they couldn't take away my right to go to the local newsagent to buy next month's issue.

I had assumed that everyone in the health service would not be able to access social networking/email/shopping sites such as Facebook, Bebo, MySpace, Hotmail or even EBay, but was surprised to find that some could. One respondent said that she could access all web-based email and social networking sites and wasn't aware of anything being blocked despite using the internet every day.

One of my concerns has been the blocking in some Trusts of blogs, not just some, but all blogs. I find this very disappointing as I use blogs as a way of communicating with people on courses or who have similar work interests. The concerns seem to be around what people say on these blogs and the associated advertising, such as pop-ups. Unfortunately, in many Trusts this is non-negotiable as all blogs are prohibited – we have found that the NLH (National Library for Health) and the NLH Institute for Innovation blogs are routinely blocked throughout the NHS.

Most Trusts will unblock sites if you ask them. At my Trust, the IT staff are happy to do this if you send them the full address and explain why you need access; however, how do you know if it is worth asking for, if you can't access it?

The good news is that we may not have to suffer this forever; there is a plan to improve the situation. The Technical Design Authority are working with the NLH to do a full national survey of this in 2008 and it is to be hoped that they take notice of these issues and develop a strategy for tackling it. The frustration and anger of the librarians I talked to needs to be considered and it is to be hoped that the NLH have enough 'clout' to deal with