

Current literature

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

Bracke PJ et al. Evidence-based medicine search: a customisable federated search engine. *J Med Libr Assoc* 2008; 96(2): 108–113

The Arizona Health Sciences Library is developing an evidence-based medicine (EBM) search tool which searches various online clinical resources and presents the results according to the pyramid of evidence. The easier it is to access evidence from a range of resources, the less likely clinicians are to take the more straightforward, yet less effective, approach of using search engines such as Google and Yahoo. This tool searches resources including PubMed, the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (CDSR), the Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effectiveness, UpToDate, Stat!Ref, and the National Guideline Clearinghouse. The levels of evidence used are based on those from the Oxford Centre for Evidence Based Medicine, and the search methodology required has been designed by librarians to enhance impact, yet not to expect expert searching skills by those using the system. It also retains the use of vocabulary mapping and relevance ranking in the individual resources to maintain search sophistication, and ranks results from CDSR separately thus enabling users to view the highest-quality results. EBM filters are used and adapted to each database. This tool is a similar resource to the UK-based TRIP database <www.tripdatabase.com>, and has been piloted amongst accident and emergency physicians who have given positive feedback. This tool has been presented during 'grand rounds' meetings where interest was

generated from other departments, and it shows much potential for further development.

Freifeld CC et al. HealthMap: global infectious disease monitoring through automated classification and visualization of internet media reports. *J Am Med Informatics Assoc* 2008; 15(2): 150–157

Monitoring disease outbreaks can be a tricky and time-consuming business, with reports appearing in a vast number of resources. There is not a central place which assimilates the wide range of online resources of disease outbreak information, and this is the challenge which the HealthMap project was designed to address. HealthMap.org <www.healthmap.org> is a freely available website, operating since 2006, integrating data from various online resources such as news sites and official alerts such as the World Health Organization. The information is filtered, integrated and presented on an interactive geographic map, allowing the user to see which outbreaks are occurring in which countries. Although there were disease alerting services in existence before 2006, for example the Global Public Health Intelligence Network and proMED mail, and infectious disease websites which are popular with international travellers such as FluWikie.com, HealthMap aims to bring together all these resources and serve both lay and public health users. It is still in the early stages, and drawbacks include an uneven distribution of geographical reports, mainly due to reliance on many US-based reporting resources (e.g. Google News), and the

general uneven spread of reporting around the world. However, this remains a freely-available resource which provides important disease-outbreak information. A Spanish language version of the resource is available, and there are plans to include more languages and resources.

Omefjord G et al. Medical text-based consultations on the internet: a 4-year study. *Int J Med Informatics* 2008; 77: 114–121

This study investigated the use of an online medical consultation service in Sweden. The 'Ask the doctor' service was analysed over a period of 4 years looking at number and type of enquiries, and the gender and age of the inquirer. People are increasingly consulting the internet for medical information, and some countries already offer online medical consultations; for example, 40% of doctors in Denmark offer email consultations. 'Ask the doctor' is a free, non-commercial service which can be used anonymously, and aims to answer queries within 1 week. Queries were classified into predefined categories, with the most common one being 'symptoms and troubles'. There was a steady increase in enquiries over the 4 years studied; by the end of the study, 75% of enquirers were women aged 21–60 years, and there were approximately 60 inquiries per day. It is thought that online doctor-patient communication will become increasingly popular, but studies are needed to determine whether such communication is beneficial.