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He@lth Information on the Internet

- 1 Editorial: Internet usage statistics
Sue Childs
- 3 Building a community of practice – the 'Mental Health in Higher Education' website
Lynn Tang and Jill Anderson
- 6 Open access
Keith Nockels
- 9 View from the frontline: Setting up a website
Harry Brown
- 10 Bookmarks: Falls
John Blenkinsopp
- 11 Current literature
Marina Waddington
- 12 What's new
Laurian Williamson

Editorial: Internet usage statistics

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Remember the adage: 'lies, damned lies, and statistics' and be careful who and what you ask!

I thought it was time to do an editorial on internet usage statistics as it has been over a year¹ since I last covered this topic – a long time in the fast changing world of the internet.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) carries out an annual survey of internet usage in the UK <www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=5672&Pos=6&ColRank=1&Rank=272>: the most recent report is dated August 2007.² The results include the following:

- of households, 15.23 million (61%) had internet access: a 7% increase since 2006;
- of adults, 31.8 million (67%) had accessed the internet in the three months prior to the survey (designated as recent users): a 14% increase since 2006;
- more men (71%) are recent users than women (62%);
- more younger people (90% of 16–24-year-olds) are recent users than older people (24% of 65+-year-

olds): however, use by this older age group has increased by 60% since 2006;

- about a quarter of recent users had looked for health information (total 27%: men 24%, women 31%): this was only one of two activities where usage by women was greater than that by men – the other activity was looking for information on education/training;
- a small proportion of recent users had accessed the internet by a mobile device (laptop 18%, mobile phone 18%, PDA 4%).

The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) has been carrying out regular surveys of internet use in Britain

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www.oii.ox.ac.uk/microsites/oxis/publications.cfm, with reports published in 2003, 2005 and, most recently, 2007.³ The results include the following:

- *access by households shows a steady increase: 58%, 61%, 66% in 2003, 2005 and 2007, respectively;*
- *a similar picture is shown by access by individuals: 59%, 60%, 67%, respectively;*
- *access by men is greater than that by women: men 64%, 63%, 70% and women 55%, 57%, 65%, respectively;*
- *access by mobile devices (PDAs or mobile phones) is increasing: 5%, 10%, 21%, respectively;*
- *trust in internet information remains high: on a scale of 1 (information is totally unreliable) to 10 (information is totally reliable) the score was 6.8, 6.6, 6.6, respectively;*
- *however, confidence in people on the internet is much lower: on a scale of 1 (no confidence at all) to 5 (total confidence) the scores for different groups of people included: most doctors 3.9, 4.0, 3.9; people I know 3.9, 3.6, 3.8; people on the internet 2.7, 2.4, 2.9, respectively;*
- *when people look for information on the internet, health topics are the fourth most popular: 37%, 68% in 2005 and 2007, respectively.*

The Pew Internet & American Life Project www.pewinternet.org collects similar types of statistics for internet usage in the USA. However, it is the reports that explore certain topics in more depth that make the most interesting reading.

One recent study⁴ looked at how Americans found information to deal with 10 potential problems, including a serious health problem: 45% of respondents had dealt with a serious health problem in the two years previous to the survey. Of respondents who had experienced problems, their overall top information sources were the internet (58%), professionals (53%), family or friends (45%). However, this pattern was quite different if you look at the results for health problems only: the top sources consulted were professionals (83%), family and friends (51%), internet (46%). Irrespective of the problem

and the information source, about two-thirds of respondents were very successful and approximately a third were somewhat successful in getting information to help them. For health problems specifically, the corresponding figures were 57% and 32%, respectively. The internet seemed to be the best source, with 55% of respondents saying they had found a lot of information from there and 35% saying they had found some information.

One recent Pew report⁵ looked at people with a disability or chronic disease: about a fifth of American adults have a condition that affects their activities. Of these, 51% go online compared with 74% without such conditions. However, the ones who went online were 'avid consumers of health information'. 'Chronic' e-patients, compared with other e-patients were:

- *more likely to go online for information about their conditions;*
- *more likely to have their health behaviour and interactions with health professionals affected;*
- *less likely to start with search engines and more likely to start with a health website;*
- *more likely to be frustrated by lack of information or inability to find what they wanted: however, both types of e-patients were generally positive about their online health searches.*

However, both types of e-patients rarely assessed the quality of the information by checking its source or date.

But remember the adage: 'lies, damned lies, and statistics'. I was looking at video clips of a spoof American news show last night. One of the stories reported a survey that found that most children did not want health care, accompanied by clips of babies crying when being given a vaccination. So be careful who and what you ask!

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Foresight Training Resource Pack

www.npsa.nhs.uk/patientsafety/improvingpatientsafety/humanfactors/foresight/

This resource pack developed by the National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) and made available in May 2008 is aimed specifically at nurses and midwives in all care settings. The training, which is designed to be facilitated, aims to improve awareness of the factors that combine to increase the likelihood of patient safety incidents and improve understanding of 'risk prone situations' and situations that could be considered as a 'near miss'. The training is based around a series of scenarios in paper and video formats. The scenarios use different techniques to enable users to practise the skills needed to identify situations when a patient safety incident is more likely to occur, and to encourage discussion and reflection. There are scenarios relevant to acute, primary and mental health settings. Other materials required and instructions for facilitators are included. The pack is designed to be used flexibly whether in organised training sessions or in meetings or handovers.