

Internet use essay



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In 2001, it was estimated that “... about 70 percent of the people who use the Internet use it to find health information” (Flower, 96). More than 90% said yes when surveyed as to whether or not they believed that they were getting good health information from the net (Flower, 2001). Yet at the same time, when doctors were asked “... whether patients can find good information online, most of them say no”(Flower 76). These figures raise questions about the liability of health information that students find on the net. If this was the case in 2001, how much more is it the case now since Internet use has increased? The Internet is arguably the most significant technical and social development to come to mankind since the invention of the wheel.

And while archeologist can tell anybody that the advent of the wheel came to different societies at different times, the use and availability of the World Wide Web (AKA: web, net, internet) has spanned the globe in a decade. A decade ago the FDA published a warning about taking all net-based health information for fact. In that warning, the FDA stated that “... anyone-reputable scientist or quack-who has a computer, a modem, and the necessary software can publish a Web page...” and that people “... must protect [themselves] by carefully checking out the source of any information [they] obtain.” (Larkin, 1996). Because the net is readily available to any person with access to a computer and a phone hookup, and because publishing information on the net requires only access to the net, and finally because the net’s content is yet largely unrestricted, there is a vast expanding universe of information to be had by any person with a question.

For this reason, the net has also been dubbed the Information Highway. However awesome the net is, sifting through the net's informational muck to find the gold takes an experienced and discerning individual (AKA: surfer). This is where people, particularly students, run into a wide array of problems trying to locate liable health information on the net. Type in a health-related query into any search engine and chances are good that many top-listed items are in fact marketing a product. This, in itself would not pose a problem to the student who needs liable health information.

However, many of these sites market their products by disguising them as holding scholarly information on whatever issue is being researched. This particularly holds true for any health-related issues concerning nutrition. For example, enter the word carbohydrate into Google's search query and there are 23, 800, 000 sites containing at least some reference to carbohydrate. Of the 19 links that loaded on the first page, nine were trying to sell a product. When a site is trying to sell a product, the health information on the page becomes questionable, as the author's motives are clearly not focused on providing unbiased, factual information.

Pornographic site content may distract adolescents that search the web for health information. This statement may sound like a bad joke at first, however, a survey and study on 412 teenagers from culturally diverse backgrounds found that "... out of 16 possible health topics that they sought information on, the five topics that were most frequently cited were sex (42. 1%)"...(Borzekowski, 2001). Following sex, "... fitness, exercise (41.

6%), sexually transmitted diseases (37.0%), diet and nutrition (36.5%), and alcohol and other drug use (24.7%)..." were the most sought out health topics teenagers looked up on the net (Borzekowski, 2001). If a teenager is looking up health information on sex, he or she could easily run into and be distracted by pornographic sites unless the computer they are using has blocks running.

Because there is little regulation of the World Wide Web, the Internet is, to a degree, taking measures to police itself. An example of this is the frequent number of sites on the net that offer guidelines for evaluating the reliability level for health information web pages. Typing in a search of "How to evaluate health material on the Internet" into Google's search engine brings up the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) web site on the topic as one of the first items listed. The title of the FDA's site is, in fact, named "How to Evaluate Health Information on the Internet". Looking up and searching out the content of similar sites finds that they all general follow the same guidelines. The FDA's guidelines for evaluating health information on the net can reveal some of the problems students can run into in terms of the reliability of the material they find.

The first thing that the FDA site recommends is to find out who runs the site in question. Students need to question the author/creator of web pages. Unlike textbooks where the "... written material is edited and revised before publication, web pages simply "appear" on the Internet" (Browne et. al, 2000). The author or agency that published the health web page should be listed. Sometimes, when no apparent author can be found, look in the "

About Us or About This Web Site section, and there's usually a link to that section on the site's home page" (How to, 2005).

Students might have problems obtaining liable health information on the net if they do not ask what the purpose of the site they are viewing is.

Subsequently, the FDA's site on evaluating health sites also suggest that a person should ask what is the purpose of the site (How to, 2005)? Is the site trying to present information only? Are they selling something? Is the site looking to raise money (How to, 2005). Things that should tip a student off that the legitimacy of the health information presented may not be 100% legitimate include: a site that promises miracle cures, sensational writing styles, and a request for information such as your email address (How to, 2005). The third item of advice the FDA gives in evaluating health sites is to know where the site got its information.

Accordingly, the FDA states that: Many health and medical Web sites post information collected from other Web sites or sources. If the person or organization in charge of the site did not write the material, the original source should be clearly identified. Be careful of sites that don't say where the information comes from... (How to, 2005). Students should look for sites whose web address end in '.

gov' for government-sponsored sites such as the U. S. Department of Health or '. edu' for Universities such as Saint John Hopkins, or '. org' that will include many not for profit organizations such as the American Cancer Society's web site (How to, 2005). On the other hand, students need to be aware that most site addresses ending in .

.com are privately owned or commercial sites and subsequently, their motives for posting the site as well as their sources of information need to be questioned (How to, 2005). This is not to say that .com sites are bad. This is only to say that the student needs to question and evaluate the .com sites with a little more scrutiny. The FDA also recommends that people include in their evaluation of a given health site a check to see when the last time the page was updated (How to, 2005).

A health site that puts its most current update in an easy to find place is always welcome. Some health sites do not take the trouble to list a last-update message. The FDA's web site on Health-site evaluation places the last update month and year directly under the page title – and this lends further credibility to the site's content. An example follows: a Google search of ' melatonin facts' brings up many hits as this hormone was touted in the 1990's as an anti-aging pill. It is still sold in the synthetic form. Most web sites that list out all the purported health benefits do not give any date when their page was last updated.

For that matter, and just as – if not more – importantly, they do not state the date of the information they have posted. This may be due to the fact that many of the miracle health claims of melatonin have been challenged hard since the 1990's. A closer look into the example melatonin site found in the Google search shows that the site is actually trying to sell both literature on melatonin and the hormone itself. The (undated) informational material on melatonin was showcased with the marketing being sidelined. As a rule, students need to do the following two things when evaluating the date of health information on the web:” When was the information added/updated

electronically?” How old was the information when it was added/updated electronically? (Ojalah, 2000)It is not enough to ask when the page was updated, students need to ask the date of the original material. This is to say, in other words: a web site publisher might update his site today with outdated information.

Determining the date of original material often takes further research. For health-related concerns – the extra diligence is more often than not worth the trouble. Most students have busy schedules. Academic, home, work, and social life demands a large amount of their time and energy. Confounding an already too busy lifestyle is the way life is changing from technological advances and the marketing of mass media in ways that busy people want instant answers and results – especially on matters concerning web searches.

This makes it even more critical to make students aware of the need to practice a higher amount of caution and discernment when looking up health information on the net.