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Patients' internet use in New Zealand for information about medicines: Implications for policy and practice

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ABSTRACT

Background: The ubiquitous use of the internet sees patients increasingly look online for information about their medicines.

Objective: This study aimed to understand the use of internet to meet medicine information needs of a sample of New Zealand patients.

Method: Using a descriptive exploratory approach 60 mental health and general medical adult patients at one large urban were interviewed. These semi-structured interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded for inductive thematic analysis.

Findings: This study found that the internet is frequently used to meet the medicines information needs of patients. Despite the ease of access to information on the internet patients need guidance to locate credible and trustworthy online resources.

Conclusions: Implications from this study relate to both practice and policy, and include the need for health professionals to have enhanced communication skills as they become information brokers who provide supplementary, reliable sources of patient-centric medicines information. Having a New Zealand specific website that includes an extensive section on medicines is a policy recommendation of this study, as is identifying tools to readily identify patients' needs and preferences for medicines information.

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Introduction

There has been a marked rise in internet use since 2000 in almost all nations [1]. This increase has been identified as essential to a digital economy and a powerful catalyst for 'innovation, economic growth and social wellbeing' [2: p.5], with the potential to benefit not just one nation, but many nations. Harnessing the benefits of the internet for healthcare professionals and patients in terms of facilitating access to health information has been frequently reported [3]. The internet provides many with easy, convenient access to health information and the number of health-

related websites and patients seeking online health information has grown substantially over the past decade and a half [4]. Of note, there is currently debate about how equitable this increased access is [5]. Of the different types of healthcare information available, information relating to medicines is one of the most important, and a common topic of interest for many patients [3]. In this report patient is used to denote an in-patient healthcare consumer, in preference to either client or service-user. Increased access to high quality medicines information written specifically to meet patients' needs has the potential to revolutionise patient self-management and increase adherence to medication regimens. Yet despite the abundance of information available via the internet, there remains a lack of understanding of how New Zealand patients use the internet to access information about medicines. This descriptive, exploratory study aimed to understand the use of internet to meet medicine information needs of a sample of New Zealand patients from one urban hospital. The following report

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discusses how the internet is currently used by the participating patients to access medicines information, and the potential for the information to influence self-management and medication adherence.

Use of the internet

Studies suggest that patients frequently use the internet to seek information about their medicines, but this is often reported alongside their search for other health information or in specific clinical contexts [6,7]. The internet has been used to support medication management in a variety of ways, but the effectiveness of internet-based interventions has been mixed. For example, a 2011 systematic review examining the use of internet-based interventions to improve medication adherence found low to moderate effects on patients' adherence, though the authors note a possible lack of reliability because of the use of self-report measurements [8]. A further example is the use of the internet to support the formation of online communities where those with similar interests can network and support each other with their health information needs. However, one small randomised controlled trial in the United Kingdom found that participation in an online community for those with asthma which discussed medications, along with other aspects of health management, did not improve adherence to preventer medication for asthma patients [9]. More recently patient portals have been introduced, providing an internet-based option to support patient access to health information, including information about their medicines. One study of 75 patients with diabetes found that whilst they were enthusiastic about being able to view their medicines, and order refills of prescriptions, patients wanted additional functionalities of patient portals such as medicines information [10]. Car et al. [11] suggest that the internet provides opportunities to support many aspects of a patient's medication management, but that more research is needed, particularly about how medicines information can be personalised. It is hoped that personalising medicines information will support patient engagement and self-management [12].

Self management

The ability for patients to successfully self-manage health conditions is multi-factorial and includes the patient having knowledge of their condition, being able to monitor and manage symptoms and their impact; and adopting lifestyles that promote their health [13]. Therefore self-management is dependent on the availability of health and medicines information that meets patient's needs. For more than a decade self-management has been touted as the direction for healthcare to take, particularly to ensure better care for those with long term conditions [14]. The aim of self-management is to support the patient to be empowered and become involved in managing their health, including their medicines. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) [15] suggests that this can be led by either the patient or a health professional. Benefits of self-management are wide-ranging—at a national level, by reducing the burden of healthcare costs as patients use the healthcare system less often and more efficiently [16]; and at a personal level, by empowering the individual and enabling them to support their own health [17].

The NICE consider patients 'to be active participants in their own healthcare, and to be involved in making decisions about their medicines' [15: p.24]. This organisation suggests a number of steps that healthcare professionals should embrace when working with patients, including: 'Offer all people the opportunity to be involved in making decisions about their medicines. Find out what level of involvement in decision-making the person would like and avoid making assumptions about this', then: 'Find out about

a person's values and preferences by discussing what is important to them about managing their condition(s) and their medicines. Recognise that the person's values and preferences may be different from those of the health professional and avoid making assumptions about these' [15: p.24–25]. In all these steps, information plays an important role in facilitating self-management—not only to achieve patient engagement, but specifically in relation to medicines, to improve adherence.

Adherence

The World Health Organisation defines adherence as: "the extent to which a person's behaviour—taking medication, following a diet, and/or executing lifestyle changes—corresponds with agreed recommendations from a health care provider" [18]. Much is written about the need to increase medication adherence. In 2014, a Cochrane review of interventions to improve the safe and effective use of medicines was conducted. This review found mixed results, after having synthesised the evidence, irrespective of disease, medication, population, or setting, on the effectiveness of interventions to improve patients' medication use [19]. Of note, the authors report that the 75 systematic reviews included had varied research aims including support for behaviour change, risk minimisation and skills acquisition, but none aimed to promote patient participation in medication-related activities, even though medication adherence was the most frequently-reported outcome. The review also found that strategies providing information or education as a single intervention appear ineffective to improve medication adherence, but are effective for improving knowledge, which is key for supporting patient choice [19]. In contrast, Kardas, Lewek, and Matyjaszczyk's review of systematic reviews of the determinants of medication adherence [20], found having knowledge and information that patients found appropriate, applicable and easily accessible was important for improving adherence. Although these reviews show contrasting findings of the relationship between medicine information and adherence, they both demonstrate that information plays a key role in facilitating patient choice—an essential aspect of adherence. Lamiraud and Geoffard [21] provide a thought provoking consideration regarding adherence by suggesting that medication non-adherence is a choice, meaning that healthcare professionals need to ensure a patient is fully informed to make that decision, and then respect their decision. Similarly, the NICE Guideline on Medicines Optimisation emphasise the responsibility of healthcare professionals to make decisions appropriate to the circumstances of the individual patient, in consultation with the patient and/or their carer or guardian [15], thereby highlighting the importance of recognising and addressing the needs of the individual, whatever they may be.

The literature confirms that many patients wish to be active participants in their own healthcare and medication management, and that increased access to reliable information is an essential aspect of facilitating this active participation [15]. The internet lends itself to being an important information source which can increase ease of access to health information. This study aims to understand the use of the internet to meet medicines information needs of a sample of New Zealand healthcare patients. It is anticipated that the outcomes of this study could be used to guide policy and inform the development of online services to address any medicines information needs identified.

New Zealand as context for this study

New Zealand was the setting for this study. In line with international trends and current evidence, [14,15,17,22] New Zealand's healthcare system is increasingly focusing on patients and their ability to self-manage their own health conditions and medicines.

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