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Original Article

The feasibility of an internet-based intervention for Chinese people with mental illness: A survey of willingness and attitude

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ABSTRACT

Background: The easy accessibility, increasing usage, and low cost of internet make it a desirable way of providing health information and delivering interventions for health consumers. Studies in other countries have verified and confirmed the effectiveness of internet-based interventions among people with mental health problems. Similar programs have yet to commence in China.

Purpose: This study investigated the willingness for, and attitude toward internet-based intervention in Chinese mental health service users and explored the feasibility of such an intervention.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey utilizing a self-developed questionnaire was administered to 186 mental health service users in Beijing, between April and May 2011.

Results: Most participants held a positive attitude toward online information and expressed interest in getting assistance from the internet. Some advice and suggestions were provided such as more ways of getting assistance, setting up more professional websites, increasing interaction, as well as having government funding and guidance.

Conclusion: Internet-based programs are feasible and applicable, and worth implementing with Chinese people with mental illness.

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1. Introduction

Recently in China increased attention has been focused on mental health problems [1]. In other countries, where mental health services are more advanced, internet-based intervention programs have been explored and manifested positive effects on patient education and self-management [2]. However, no such attempt has been initiated for Chinese mental health service users. In order to lay the foundation for future internet interventions with Chinese mental health consumers, this study set out to examine the attitudes toward, and willingness to use such interventions.

2. Background

Mental health problems are on the increase in China, causing demands on service providers and budgets. According to the latest nationwide epidemiological survey, the adjusted one-month prevalence of mental disorders in China was 17.5% [3]. Considering the huge population base of 1.34 billion, this is of great concern. It is estimated that there are eight million adults with psychiatric disabilities causing heavy burdens for families and society [1]. However, because of fear, stigma or economic disadvantage, many are neither identified nor treated properly [4].

Increasingly the internet is exerting its influence on people worldwide, and has radically affected and changed our daily lives [5]. According to the China Internet Network Information Center, up to the end of July 2011 there were 485 million internet users in mainland China [5]. As many as 36.2% of the population have their own access to the internet and even in remote villages, more than 131 million were net users.

The internet has the potential to support patients' needs for information and thereby increase empowerment. It has also become a useful and essential resource for patients' education. The low threshold of acceptability, the reduction of fear and stigma, and its flexibility provides patients with more choices and control over their illness making it an appropriate and ideal way to provide interventions such as education and self-management programmes [2].

Studies have already validated the positive effect of the internet in alleviating illness. For instance, Hoek et al. [6] conducted a study to test the effect of internet-based, self-help, problem-solving therapy in preventing depression and anxiety among adolescents. Participants received support from professionals through email for five weeks and then were followed up. The results confirmed its effectiveness in relieving patients' symptoms up to twelve months after the intervention. In Canada, Cunningham et al. [7] also verified the positive effects of an internet-based intervention among alcohol abusers. After screening via the internet, the respondents' weekly drinking consumption decreased by 30%. In Finland, Koivunen et al. [8] applied an internet-based portal for patients with schizophrenia, where patients could exchange and communicate with each other, share their experiences and get professional help. The evaluation showed that this portal was user-friendly and welcomed both by the patients and nursing staff. In addition, the internet-based

intervention also manifested its effectiveness in reducing suicidal thoughts among patients [9]. In a recent systematic review, it was concluded that internet-based interventions could promote health behavior change among patients and more investment in such deliveries, was encouraged [10].

In China, internet programmes have been developed and are considered as an efficient, cost-effective and convenient way for patient education for some disorders. For example, Huang et al. [11] tested and verified the effect of an internet support program on uncertainty in illness of breast cancer patients after surgery. Through the twelve-week intervention, abundant information, assistance through multi-disciplinary cooperation and real-time interaction were provided for the participants. Results showed that, it was an effective approach in reducing uncertainty in illness for breast cancer survivors. In another study, internet-based intervention also manifested its usefulness in patients with nasopharyngeal carcinoma [12].

At present, internet-based education or interventions have yet to be developed and tested amongst patients with mental illness in China. In view of the surge of mental illness and the future threat to the health care system, and given the success overseas and use in other disorders, there is a pressing need to determine the inclination for patients to turn to online help, and their willingness and attitude with regard to such a delivery.

3. Method

A questionnaire was developed and administered to a convenience sample of participants recruited from seven adult wards (three female and four male) in a psychiatric hospital in Beijing. This hospital is a university-affiliated mental health institution that provides services for a population of approximately 15,400,000 inhabitants in the Beijing area [13]. People with the diagnosis of mental illness and who were able to read and write were invited to participate in the study.

3.1. Instrument

The instrument was based on the Internet Behavior Questionnaire for Adolescents and consisted of three parts [14]. Part one sought general information on the participants such as gender, age, and education level. Part two examined the availability of internet and online behaviors such as, the time spent on the internet weekly, their usual behaviors and the personal impact of the internet. Part three investigated their attitude toward online information and their willingness to gain online support. The questions included their willingness and preferred ways of getting mental health related information online and the source of information which they trust. At the end of the questionnaire an open ended question sought suggestions and advice on internet-based patient education.

3.2. Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Human Research and Ethics Committee of the School of Nursing, Peking Union Medical

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