

Use of the Internet by patients attending hospital for oral and maxillofacial procedures

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Abstract

Information obtained on the Internet regarding medical procedures is largely unregulated and can be confusing. The aims of this study were to assess use of the Internet by patients attending hospital for oral and maxillofacial procedures, and to assess the quality of information provided at consultation. Data were collected prospectively using a confidential questionnaire, which was distributed to consecutive patients attending for elective operations at 2 oral and maxillofacial units: Crosshouse Hospital, Kilmarnock, and Queen Alexandra Hospital, Portsmouth ($n = 100$ at each unit). All the distributed questionnaires were returned. At both units, 95% of patients thought that discussion at the initial consultation was good or very good, and 84% at both units stated that they had access to the Internet. Internet access was consistently high among all age groups up to the age of 65, but in those aged over 65 it was considerably lower. A total of 22/84 patients (26%) at Crosshouse, and 14/84 (17%) at Queen Alexandra used the Internet to gain further information regarding their condition or procedure. All of those ($n = 14$) at Queen Alexandra, and 21/22 at Crosshouse had used Google to search for the information. Those who used the Internet to find information on their medical condition or procedure found it to be a useful resource, but they also stated that the information caused some concerns. With use of the Internet and access to it increasing we highlight the need for regulated and appropriate websites to which patients should be directed.

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Introduction

Use of the Internet and access to it in the United Kingdom and the rest of the world are generally on the increase. In the UK, 83% of households had Internet access in 2011, an increase of 22% since 2007.^{1,2} Ease of access and technological advances such as smartphones means that the Internet is literally at our fingertips. In 2011 almost half the users connected using mobile phones.^{1,2} Internet hotspots can be found in many cafes and public areas, and in 2011 they were used by 4.9 million people in the UK.^{1,2}

Little seems to have been published on the use of the Internet by patients to gain information on their medical condition or management. The most recent publications relate to patients who have been diagnosed with cancer.^{3–5} Of the publications that we found, 30–50% of patients used the Internet to gain further information on their condition or procedure.^{3–7} A recent paper on patients with head and neck cancer reported that 45% of them used it to find information on their cancer,³ and López-Gómez et al. reported 27% use of the Internet among their patients with cancer.⁵

The Internet is an important resource for many, and the information offered is wide ranging and varied. However, it is often unregulated and unreliable, and can alter a patient's understanding of their condition or management. Unregulated information can often be inaccurate and possibly out

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of date, and many users find it difficult to distinguish useful from less useful resources.

We aimed to assess use of the Internet by patients attending hospital for oral and maxillofacial procedures. In particular, we wanted to better understand which patients used it, the resources they found, and their opinions about them. We also wanted to find out patients' opinions about the information given at consultation.

Method

The proposal for the study was sent to the West of Scotland Research Ethics Service Office and no ethical review was deemed necessary.

Data were collected prospectively using a confidential questionnaire, which was distributed to 100 consecutive patients attending for elective operations at 2 oral and maxillofacial units: Crosshouse Hospital, Kilmarnock, and Queen Alexandra Hospital, Portsmouth. Only patients of 16 years and above were included. At consultation their condition or procedure was discussed without mention of the study. The questionnaire was given irrespective of the procedure involved and patients were asked to complete it on the day of operation. No patients declined to take part.

A written explanation of the survey printed at the beginning of the questionnaire highlighted the fact that it was confidential and voluntary, and would take around 5 min to complete; there were no consequences for the treatment they were to be given. Data were collated using Microsoft Access.

Results

All the questionnaires were returned (100 at both units). The mean age of patients was 45 years (range 18–89) at Crosshouse and 42 years (range 16–84) at Queen Alexandra.

Information at consultation

Patients were questioned about the verbal and written information provided at the initial consultation. Responses could be rated as very poor, poor, satisfactory, good, or very good (Table 1). At both units, 95 patients thought that discussion at initial consultation was good or very good. None of them thought that the information given was poor. Most of those who stated that they had had written information thought that it was good or very good. A total of 5 patients at Crosshouse and 7 at Queen Alexandra thought that the verbal or written information given at the initial consultation was inadequate. The main reason for this was a lack of information about the procedure they were about to undergo.

Table 1
Responses to questions about information given at consultation.

	Crosshouse Hospital (n = 100)	Queen Alexandra Hospital (n = 100)
Was your condition/procedure discussed at consultation?		
Yes	92	95
No	8	5
How useful was this discussion?	95 satisfied (good or very good)	95 satisfied (good or very good)
Were you given written information at consultation?		
Yes	50	65
No	50	35
How useful was the written information?	47/50 (94%) satisfied (good or very good)	59/65 (91%) satisfied (good or very good)

Table 2
Patients' use of the Internet for information on their condition or procedure.

	Crosshouse Hospital	Queen Alexandra Hospital
No. (%) of patients using the Internet for information	22/84 (26)	14/84 (17)
Average hours of internet use for further information	1.7	2
No. of patients using Google search engine	21/22	14/14
Proportion of men to women	1:2	1:1.3

Internet access

At both units 84 patients stated that they had access to the Internet; average usage was 9.3 h/week at Crosshouse and 6.2 h/week at Queen Alexandra. Table 2 shows details of patients' use of the Internet to search for information on their condition or procedure. Responses to questions about the usefulness of the information obtained are shown in Table 3.

Analysis of access to the Internet and age of users showed that access was consistently high among all age groups up to the age of 65 but it dropped considerably in those over 65 (Fig. 1).

Of those who used the Internet to gain further information, 17/22 (77%) at Crosshouse, and 11/14 (79%) at Queen

Table 3
Number of patients that answered "yes" to questions on information found on the Internet.

	Crosshouse Hospital (n = 22)	Queen Alexandra Hospital (n = 14)
Did the information create any concerns?	8	10
Did the information ease concerns?	18	9
Was the information useful?	19	11
Did it make the information from your consultation clearer?	14	11
Would you use the Internet again for medical information?	20	12

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