

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Health Information Needs and Reliability of Sources Among Nondegree Health Sciences Students: A Prerequisite for Designing eHealth Literacy

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Abstract

BACKGROUND Understanding health information needs and health-seeking behavior is a prerequisite for developing an electronic health information literacy (EHIL) or eHealth literacy program for nondegree health sciences students. At present, interest in researching health information needs and reliable sources paradigms has gained momentum in many countries. However, most studies focus on health professionals and students in higher education institutions.

OBJECTIVE The present study was aimed at providing new insight and filling the existing gap by examining health information needs and reliability of sources among nondegree health sciences students in Tanzania.

METHOD A cross-sectional study was conducted in 15 conveniently selected health training institutions, where 403 health sciences students were participated. Thirty health sciences students were both purposely and conveniently chosen from each health-training institution. The selected students were pursuing nursing and midwifery, clinical medicine, dentistry, environmental health sciences, pharmacy, and medical laboratory sciences courses. Involved students were either in their first year, second year, or third year of study.

RESULTS Health sciences students' health information needs focus on their educational requirements, clinical practice, and personal information. They use print, human, and electronic health information. They lack eHealth research skills in navigating health information resources and have insufficient facilities for accessing eHealth information, a lack of specialists in health information, high costs for subscription electronic information, and unawareness of the availability of free Internet and other online health-related databases.

CONCLUSION This study found that nondegree health sciences students have limited skills in EHIL. Thus, designing and incorporating EHIL skills programs into the curriculum of nondegree health sciences students is vital. EHIL is a requirement common to all health settings, learning environments, and levels of study. Our future intention is to design EHIL to support nondegree health sciences students to retrieve and use available health information resources on the Internet.

KEY WORDS electronic health information literacy, eHealth literacy, health information needs, health information sources, information-seeking behavior, health sciences students

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INTRODUCTION

Health information needs and the reliability of sources among health sciences students are increasingly significant components for supporting health sciences education. Students need a wide range of health information in order to meet their health science educational needs.¹ Understanding students' information needs and sources as well as how they obtain information helps a health information specialist to provide relevant services that encourage students to maintain up-to-date knowledge related to their field, as well as become lifelong learners.² The relevance of health information is measured by 2 indicators: first, information needs, which is a recognition that the person's knowledge is inadequate to satisfy a purpose that one needs to achieve; second, information-seeking behavior, which is the purposive searching for information because of a need to satisfy some goals.³ Rapid change in the manner in which health information is created, stored, retrieved, and transmitted has resulted in increasing challenges that health information professionals face to ensure proper and timely access to relevant health information by students.⁴ In the recent years, access to health information in an electronic environment has been made possible as a result of the advancement of technology.

Health sciences settings (including educational institutions), in relation to developing countries, experience difficulty in searching for health information that could support their education as well as clinical practice.^{1,5,6} In the health sector, information overload is one of the main challenges, where various information sources have emerged and doubled every 2 decades.^{7,8} Recently, health information has been presented in numerous formats to enable users to access various options for finding their health information. Health sciences students are required to have access to health information in both print and electronic forms in order to support their educational, research, clinical, and service activities.⁹ The rapid proliferation of health information in the current era has important implications for health education. It is thus crucial for health sciences students to be exposed to and use different sources of health information, including print and electronic formats, as well as human sources, in order to support the access and use of health-related information for their education, as well as during provision of health care services.

The present study compared the difference between students' levels of study (certificate,

diploma, and advanced diploma) rather than location of health training institutions (urban and rural), years of study (first, second, and third), or gender (men and women). The main reason is to design different electronic health information literacy programs that cater to the needs of all levels of study. This will enable health-training institutions to meet educational health information needs if their requirements differ. However, health information needs and reliability sources of nondegree programs are different from undergraduate or postgraduate programs in terms of settings, levels of study, duration of study, awards, and competence level. Hence, this research aims to fill this gap by examining health information needs and the sources of information of nondegree health sciences students in Tanzania. Furthermore, the results of this survey will provide the rationale and guidance behind the design of electronic health information literacy programs for nondegree health sciences students. This study was guided by 3 main research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What are the health information needs of nondegree health sciences students in health training institutions in Tanzania?

RQ2: To what extent are health sciences students in nondegree programs aware of and use print, electronic, and human health information sources to meet their education information needs?

RQ3: What challenges are encountered by nondegree health sciences students in meeting their health information needs to support their education?

By responding to these questions, this study will contribute further insights into current knowledge in the field and improve the general understanding of various aspects of nondegree health sciences students' health information needs and their perceptions of the reliability of health information resources and information-seeking behavior for their education requirements. The findings of this study are expected to serve as baseline evidence and lead to specific recommendations to inform researchers in developing and designing future learning management system interventions for teaching and learning EHIL.

METHODS

Study Design. A cross-sectional study was conducted in 15 conveniently selected health training institutions, for which 450 health sciences students were invited to participate in this study. Thirty

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