



# Trust between physicians and patients in the e-health era



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## ABSTRACT

With the expanding availability of Internet capabilities in the recent two decades, many Americans have used these services to search about medical information for multiple purposes. Americans are using the Internet for acquiring information and alternate treatments regarding their health care issues; including the selection of a physician based off of online physician ratings. Many questions derive from societal changes that come about when technology advances such as the development of the Internet. Medical sociologists have a long history of concentrating on the doctor-patient relationship. This study focuses on the determinations that influence the trust between the patient and their doctor. Millions of people now have access to the World Wide Web, allowing medical advice to be just a click away. A closed-ended questionnaire on the above topics was administered at the end of 2014 to a random sample size of 240 people. The age of the participants were 18 years and older and they resided in the Greater Cincinnati area during the time of data collection. The purpose of the questionnaire was to examine data from various age groups and study those respondents' attitudes concerning any changes in the trust between patients and their physicians due to technological advancements. The results of the study revealed that the respondents continue to retain a high level of trust with their physicians and still prefer face-to-face consultations. This is even though they have access to massive amounts of information right at their fingertips. The respondents also showed high levels of maturity and rationality when using online medical information in their decision-making regarding their healthcare needs and choices.

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Trust between a physician and a patient has always been a major topic of concern in any societal structure. The initial level of trust that occurs between them lays the foundation of the relationship. Trust levels impact how well the relationship will prosper and develop. Sociologists and other social scientists have monitored and studied the doctor-patient relationship and have discovered many components between the two that influence one another. In the past, the relationship between patients and doctors was imbalanced. Physicians, for the most part, had full control over medical information and the decision making for treatment was rendered at the doctor's discretion. This type of relationship left the patients with little power concerning their healthcare. Technological modernization in the current e-health era has allowed for the treatment of ailments to be a joint decision by both a physician and his/her patients. If inadequate levels of trust occur within the described relationship, the treatments and diagnoses of the patients becomes more vulnerable. Currently, the relationships and levels of trust have been impacted by the public access to medical

resources, which helps those who are not knowledgeable about healthcare find medical information online rather quickly. Cybernauts are browsing information for either themselves or others around them, while assessing the credibility of the doctors' diagnosis or investigating online ratings for a current or future physician. The accessibility and use of the Internet has allowed public forums to be created. Patients or loved ones can now search the web for medical issues, explain their conditions, and receive feedback from others who have suffered similar medical symptoms [11]. E-health information varies and many different sources are available for all medical topics, from mild sicknesses to those that are more serious. The information that is explored by the patient is certainly advantageous, but if misunderstood or misused it can be detrimental to the individuals' health. The purpose of this study is to focus on how massive amounts of e-health information online will improve, influence, or damage the level of trust between physicians and patients.

## 1. Theoretical framework

Historically, doctor/patient relationships were altogether uncomplicated. The patients would seek medical attention, and

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depending on the ailment, doctors would make a visit to the patient's home or if possible the patient would make their way to the local clinic. The physician would examine the patient and for the most part solely make decisions based upon their patients' needs [10]. The physician and the patient normally developed a long lasting and trust-filled relationship. Patients traditionally relied on the expertise of their physician; this was usually the only endorsement they needed. They had high levels of trust within their physician and depended on them [4] for the proper diagnosis and treatment without questioning their professionalism or authority. The patients' confidence was built around the fact that the physician had received specialized training in the medical field [12]. According to Ludwig and Burke [12], the relationship between a physician and a patient has changed in the second half of the 20th century. The relationship has shifted toward a mutual decision making process, allowing the patient to have an opinion in their health care treatments. This perspective creates patient autonomy, allowing the individual a right to make decisions based on their own personal values or virtues. This mutual trust has declined a bit in the turn of the 21st century. The impact of technological advancement and rapid social change has influenced how the medical field has come to be managed in modern society. In addition, the vast availability of medical information has influenced the interactions between physicians and patients [19]. Today a patient is likely to encounter a more impersonal experience. Healthcare has turned into a lucrative matter; the experience is more about money than in decades past. From many aspects the doctor is viewed as a supplier of services, and the consumer of the services is the patient, who is paying, at times, exorbitant costs to seek medical care [14]. Medical services continue to improve, and studies have begun to focus on positive technological influences on the relationships between doctors and patients due to these advancements in the healthcare field. Chen [3] explained that these improvements occur daily, and when he compared female and male patients he found that females were more likely to be dissatisfied with their physicians, their communications with staff or nurses, and their medication and/or healthcare facilities. Males, however, were more positive about their medical experiences.

A relationship can be defined as the interaction or connection between two or more people. Relationships between a physician and a patient are considered to be a central feature within the health care field, and tie into the quality of diagnosis and treatment. Physicians and patients enter into a social contract, in which the physicians understand the patients' needs and the patients acknowledge the care provided [18]. This concept is fundamental to modern medical ethics and trust. Medical ethics and trust are important when studying the relationships between physicians and patients. High levels of trust are more likely to result in the patient accepting the medical advice given to them and vice versa [12]. Banerjee and Sanyal [2] claimed that this type of social contract can lead to higher levels of cooperation between both the physician and the patient. High levels of trust in most medical cases have resulted in quicker rates of recovery for the patients. If low levels of trust are established, this can result in the patients refusing to follow through with the diagnosis and treatment; ultimately, lowering the level of recovery rates.

Evaluating the levels of trust that exist within the relationship between a physician and their patient has been a special focus of the social sciences. This is largely due to the fact that medical health services can be impacted by several social factors, such as the aforementioned technological advancements that allow patients to search online for medical information. According to Anderson et al. [1], the estimated number of Americans who have searched online for health related information has reached at least 70 million people. The information sought after is not for condition research and

treatments; the searches also include doctor ratings, inquiries for home remedies, and/or searches for educational purposes. The e-health era has shifted medical treatment and diagnosis towards becoming a more sophisticated process [16]. The process now includes technologically advanced resources, including, but not limited to, access and availability of medical information online. With such readily available data, the patient may now convey an opinion that ultimately results in a disconnected relationship between the doctor and her/his patient. Haskard-Zolnieriek and DiMatteo [8] investigated communication within the doctor-patient relationship. They claimed patients' adherence to the doctor-patient relationship needs to be established at high levels in order for the patient to fully cohere to the recommendations of their physicians. This is a vital and essential factor during the process of diagnosis, treatment, and aftercare. Haskard-Zolnieriek and DiMatteo [8] considered communication to be a salient determining factor throughout the entire medical care process including aftercare and prognosis. They also reported that about 25% of patients who have visited the physician experienced a non-adhering relationship. Now that patients have access to the Internet, the speculation arises as to whether or not nonadherence to the relationship will increase, decrease, or be uninterrupted. Online browsing for medical information allows for patients to track and manage their personal health information [15]. Patients are currently researching their health care issues and sometimes they find a second opinion by an alternate healthcare professional. Patients who feel comfortable with the research acquired online may simply turn to online remedies instead of scheduling a face-to-face consultation from their healthcare provider [5]. Given that patients have an alternative option to surf the web, they are often able to strengthen their communication skills with their doctor. When the patient understands more about their medical concerns, they are less likely to have a misunderstanding with their physician. When doctors and patients agree with each other on a certain level about the health issue at hand, the trust levels between the two are increased. Trust establishes confidence, which can result in a better prognosis for concerning health issues [2]. Modern society has established an equal social position between doctors and patients. This is one of the major characteristics of the current doctor-patient relationship. Social changes such as these can help strengthen the relationships, thus, improving the quality of medical care as well as services [17].

Since the launch of the Internet, Manhattan Research [13] surveyed over 5000 people [6]; of those respondents, 54% reported that they had used the Internet to search for medical information. The findings of the research concluded that a consistent trend is showing that people in today's society are more comfortable using the Internet for health care decisions than they have ever been before. Dolan [6] indicates that many of the people who are browsing for health information are searching for: different symptoms, determining which treatment is the best choice, and which clinical facility they should use for healthcare services. Fox [7] focused on the fact that many people participating in online medical searches still maintain higher trust levels and value their doctors' opinion over what they had discovered online. Online sources offer a bulk of information that is sometimes difficult to filter out for those who are skilled and unskilled in healthcare. Unlike Dolan's findings, Fox [7] claims that the majority of the people he studied had searched for health care advice on particular medications or other people's health experiences. In his study, very few participants had used the Internet for doctor, staff, or hospital reviews.

Banerjee and Sanyal [2] observed the consultations between doctors and patients, they discovered that patients with lower levels of education, and/or patients coming from rural backgrounds, were more likely to be passive during their consultations compared to those with higher levels of education and/or from

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