

Original research article

Reproductive health, the Arab world and the internet: usage patterns of an Arabic-language emergency contraception web site

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Abstract

Emergency contraception (EC) has the potential to reduce significantly the incidence of unintended pregnancy worldwide. In May 2003, the first Arabic-language web site dedicated to disseminating information about and increasing awareness of EC was launched. This paper examines patterns of web site use and user profiles over a 19-month period. Analysis of Not-2-Late.com use shows that the Arabic web site users are interested in different aspects of EC than the English web site users, suggesting the importance of creating culturally specific content when adapting and translating health education materials. Arabic web site users demonstrate significant interest in general reproductive health issues not specific to EC, suggesting a need for greater availability of Arabic-language health education resources through the Internet. © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Estimates suggest that approximately one fourth of all pregnancies in the Arab world are unintended [1]. Emergency contraceptives are medications or devices that can prevent pregnancy after unprotected sexual intercourse has occurred. Emergency contraception (EC) has been demonstrated repeatedly to be safe, effective and acceptable to users worldwide. Emergency contraception has the potential to reduce the incidence of unintended pregnancy in many regions, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) [2,3]. As the legality of abortion varies considerably throughout the Arab world, the prevention of unintended pregnancy has the potential to reduce both the unintended birth rate and the number of unsafe and/or clandestine abortions. Despite the overall increase in educational resources dedicated to EC, few resources have been developed for Arabic-speaking populations.

Internet resources are becoming an increasingly important mechanism for the dissemination of health information [4,5]. Internet sites dedicated to sexual and reproductive

health appear particularly popular among individuals seeking information on issues related to sexually transmitted infections, contraception and pregnancy [6–8]. Over the past decade, Internet access has expanded rapidly, particularly in the Arab world where the proportion of the population with access to the Internet nearly tripled from 1% in 2000 to 2.8% in 2002 [9,10]. Although the proportion of internet users in the Arab world is significantly lower than the proportion of users in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (38.3% in 2002), the increase in Internet use throughout the Arab world suggests great potential for expanding the dissemination of health information through the web [10].

In May 2003, Ibis Reproductive Health and the Office of Population Research (OPR) at Princeton University jointly developed and launched the first Arabic-language web site dedicated to EC. This Arabic-language web site was adapted from Not-2-Late.com, an English-language EC web site jointly operated by the OPR and the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals (ARHP). This paper presents information about web site user profiles and use patterns for the period from June 1, 2003, to December 31, 2004. The results illustrate that there is a considerable

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interest in Arabic-language EC information and that the Internet has the potential to serve as an effective vehicle for disseminating this information. Further, analysis of the use patterns highlights the aspects of EC in which Arabic-language web site users are most interested. Although some of these interests are shared with users of the English-language web site, our analysis demonstrates that users of the Arabic-language version are interested in some different aspects of EC than users of the English version. Significantly, visitors to the Arabic EC web site make use of the web pages that were specifically designed for an Arab audience, suggesting the importance of developing culturally specific content when translating and adapting health education materials. Finally, the results suggest that there are a number of avenues through which Internet-based reproductive health information could successfully expand.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Development of the Arabic version of *Not-2-Late.com*

The English-language EC web site Not-2-Late.com was launched in 1994 and is operated by the OPR and the ARHP. The peer-reviewed, frequently updated site provides accurate information about EC derived from the medical literature [11,12]. The web site was subsequently translated into French and Spanish. In order to expand information about EC to Arabic-speaking populations both within and outside of the MENA region, Ibis Reproductive Health and the OPR jointly undertook the development of an Arabic version of Not-2-Late.com in 2002.

In addition to translating the content of the English-language web site, we aimed to adapt the content of the site to target better an audience from the Arab world. The adaptation included the addition of six “question and answer” pages and the inclusion of several regional references.

In translating and adapting Not-2-Late.com, we faced a number of technical and linguistic challenges. When we initiated the project, no consensus existed on the Arabic phrase for “emergency contraception.” Indeed, extensive searches yielded few references to EC in Arabic, and the few terms we did find varied considerably. Therefore, we interviewed a number of health service providers and conducted focus group discussions with university students from Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia in order to develop a term that was comprehensible across dialects and accurately reflected the use-timeframe of EC. Based on this feedback, we settled on the phrase “the emergency prevention of pregnancy” (*Man ‘a al-Hamal al-Tari’*). After adapting and translating the content of Not-2-Late.com, the text was reviewed by native Arabic speakers from Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Our reviewers included health service professionals, university students and high school graduates (outside of the allied health professions). As our target audience for the web site included both health service

providers and potential users of EC throughout the Arab world, the feedback from the reviewers allowed us to modify further the web site such that the text would be accessible to individuals with a variety of educational and professional backgrounds. As spoken Arabic varies considerably throughout the region, our review process also ensured that the materials were compatible with different regional dialects.

On May 15, 2003, we launched the Arabic version of the web site. Our bilingual launch announcement was sent to individuals (health service providers, academics, researchers, etc.), listservs and organizations (reproductive health, higher education, etc.) throughout the Arab world as well as in Europe and the United States. In July 2003, in conjunction with the ARHP, we conducted a second launch announcement in which we also targeted a number of Middle Eastern and U.S. media outlets. Funded by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Arabic version of Not-2-Late.com is hosted on the OPR’s server and has no connection with any companies that manufacture or sell EC products.

2.2. Overview of web site structure and content

In addition to the homepage, the Arabic-language web site contains a list of answers to 42 frequently asked questions (FAQs), four pages that provide basic information about methods of EC (information pages), a page containing a list of references and a page with current news items about EC. In addition, the web site includes a directory of all known brands of oral contraceptive pills (OCPs) that can be used for EC and the countries where they are available, the levels of the estrogen ethinyl estradiol (if any) and the progestin levonorgestrel in the pills, and the proper dose needed for use as EC. This directory is searchable by country and we refer to it as the country directory. The information pages link to a group of pages with information about specific pill brands that can be used for EC, which we refer to as the pills directory. The Arabic version of the web site also links to two English-language databases accessed through Not-2-Late.com: the database of EC providers in the United States and Canada, and the database of EC-related educational and promotional materials from the United States and abroad. Finally, the Arabic-language web site also contains a short online-feedback survey that visitors can access through the homepage.

2.3. Definitions

A *user* (also referred to as a *visitor*) is defined as anyone who visits the web site at least once during a calendar month. Each visitor/user is identified by an Internet protocol address or other log file data (i.e., cookie data). Even if the same user connects to the web site on multiple occasions during a single month, only one user is recorded. If the same user connects to the web site during two or more calendar months, (s)he will be recorded as one user for each month in which a connection was made. Public computers (available through

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