

Internet guide for older people and their physicians

Age UK is currently campaigning for digital inclusion of older people and with the introduction of Silver Surfers' week, older patients are benefitting from technological change. Online health information is one such technology being embraced, but young and old are vulnerable to the dangers that lurk on the internet.

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No longer are silver surfers single finger typists who need grandchildren to guide them gingerly across the information highway. Many GPs have started a challenging consultation with news from an older patient that they have printed information about their condition from the internet.

A recent five-year survey of the visitors to our practice website found that 22% of patients who visited were over 60 years of age; 3% were over 75 years and only 1% were under 21 years. The survey, which had over 1200 respondents, found that 78% of all users said they visited the practice website to use the online repeat prescribing system, and this is likely to be one of the reasons for the age range distortion in the usage survey.

Online health information

The internet is now ubiquitous and is becoming more accessible everyday, enabling older people to seek out online health

information that is relevant and of interest to them. There is a booming online advertising market now targeting the older demographic. Many of the online health-related websites carry accompanying targeted advertising for age-related products like chair lifts, care homes and hearing aids. A good example that combines detailed health information with advertising is the Boots website www.webmd.boots.com/

Very few people, young or old, fully understand the communication revolution, the cutting edge of which is

racing away from us all in many directions. The younger generations are more familiar with the technology but we are all vulnerable to the dangers, seen and unseen, which lurk in the electronic swamps of databases, networks and clouds. The early swamp dwellers of viruses and hackers have not gone away but have been joined by identity theft, online scams and credit card fraud. No one is completely safe but the older surfer is less experienced with this online quagmire and because of this more likely to drown.

Key points

- The internet is now ubiquitous and is becoming more accessible everyday, enabling older people to seek out online health information.
- There are millions of patients, both young and old, who need help to identify firm ground when making informed health choices.
- Charity websites are often comprehensive and provide a professional and patient perspective.
- www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk and www.patient.co.uk are good starting points.

Box 1 Useful website links for older people – UK based

Boots	www.boots.com
Macmillan Cancer Support	www.macmillan.org.uk
Information Standard Scheme	www.theinformationstandard.org
The Health On the Net Foundation	www.hon.ch
NHS Choices	www.nhs.uk
Surgery Door	www.surgerydoor.co.uk
Patient UK	www.patient.co.uk
Royal National Institute of the Blind	www.rnib.org.uk
Prostate Action	www.prostateaction.org.uk
U3A - The University Of The Third Age	www.u3a.org.uk
Independent Age	www.independentage.org.uk
First Stop	www.firststopcareadvice.org.uk
Keep Warm Keep Well Campaign	www.dh.gov.uk
Cancer Research UK	www.cancerresearchuk.org
Arthritis Care	www.arthritiscare.org.uk
Arthritis Research UK	www.arthritisresearchuk.org
Alzheimer's Research UK	www.alzheimersresearchuk.org
Carers UK	www.carersuk.org
Parkinson's Disease	www.parkinsons.org.uk
Royal National Institute for Deaf People	www.rnid.org.uk
Macular Disease Society	www.macular-disease.org
National Osteoporosis Society	www.nos.org.uk
Blood Pressure Association	www.bpassoc.org.uk
Diabetes UK	www.diabetes.org.uk
World Health Organisation	www.who.int
Age Psychology	www.psige.org
Stroke Association	www.stroke.org.uk
Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme	www.csv-rsvp.org.uk
Grand Parents Plus	www.grandparentsplus.org.uk
Pensions Advisory Service	www.pensionsadvisoryservice.org.uk
Natural Death	www.naturaldeath.org.uk
Housing Care	www.housingcare.org
Marie Curie Cancer Care	www.mariecurie.org.uk
Get Safe Online	www.getsafeonline.org
Action on Elder Abuse	www.elderabuse.org.uk
Alzheimer's Society	www.alzheimers.org.uk
Older People's Information Network	www.opin.org.uk
Counsel and Care	www.counselandcare.org.uk
Centre for Policy on Ageing	www.cpa.org.uk
Anchor	www.anchor.org.uk
The British Geriatrics Society	www.bgs.org.uk
Saga	www.saga.co.uk
Age-Net	www.age-net.co.uk
Age Exchange	www.age-exchange.org.uk
Later Life	www.laterlife.com
TIDF50	www.idf50.co.uk



Perils of online information

Trying to help herself an intelligent lady in her early eighties thought she would like to find out more about her frozen shoulder that had given her six months of significant disability with joint pain when dressing and driving. The GP had injected the shoulder without benefit. It was another month before she was due to see her GP again. She decided to look up “frozen shoulder” on Google. For her the internet was Google. She did not understand they were not synonymous. “Very interesting” was her comment about the information she accessed, but it contradicted the advice she had been given by her GP about exercises and drug therapy. The first link at the top of the Google search results at that time was Arthritis Research UK <http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org/> and the second ranked link was for a private physiotherapist selling a book about frozen shoulder treatments. When asked about her search results she

gave both links equal credibility due to their high position and was most surprised to learn that anyone could publish information on Google (the internet) without scrutiny or qualification. She just didn’t know the rules or the lack of them. To the young experienced user her naivety and lack of skill appear childish. There are millions of patients like her, both young and old, who are exposed and sinking and need help to identify firm ground when making informed health choices.

Incorrect information

According to a paper published in *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 60% of information available online is incorrect. In the report published last year, the authors stated that searching for information on UK websites on five common issues, including autism and breastfeeding, revealed that only about 200 out of 500 (or 40%) sites offered correct information.¹

Another survey, showed that an astonishing 65% of those questioned choose to surf the net when they want to know the answer to a medical query, compared to 43% who ask their doctor, and just 27% who look for information via television programmes. A mere 14% valued government health information services.² Maybe we should not be astonished and just train ourselves to be more comfortable and confident when using this fantastic health information tool called the internet.

Using recommended sites

There is good news for the 80 year old lady and for her physician drowning under information and guideline overload. There are signposts and beacons to escort us through the tricky wetlands that make up healthcare on the internet for the older person. It is wise to use a few lighthouses we know and recognise rather than be tempted

off course by the brighter lights that can lure the unwary traveller from solid ground.

There are codes of conduct and accreditation available to health websites and two of the most well-known are The Health On the Net Foundation (HON) www.hon.ch and the Information Standard “quality mark” — which shows that a website is accredited to an independent certification scheme supported by the Department of Health www.theinformationstandard.org/ These accreditation websites are not widely applied even though they are respected. There is no mandatory code to which all health websites need adhere.

Disease-related websites

Disease-related websites are helpful to physicians and patients. These websites are often comprehensive and provide a professional and patient perspective. They have editorial panels of patients and expert physicians in that field. They stand out as a beacon of scientific understanding of the time and provide a balanced view of general opinion. They are well designed and regularly updated. They are often charity based and funded by donations and carry responsible relevant advertising.

Arthritis Care (www.arthritiscare.org.uk) is a good example of an accessible disease related website in the strictest sense, it has a wide range of interactive features, forums, campaigns, YouTube videos, news and email newsletter features. Websites like this are likely to have cost many thousands of pounds but can justify this expense by the sense of

community and awareness they create for their cause.

NHS direct

Good general resources and jumping off points for further help and research would be www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk. The NHS direct and NHS Choices websites (www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx) are great examples of what can be achieved with focus, effort and plenty of your money. If you haven't looked at the NHS Choices website for a while, check it out, it is a brilliant health website covering the 99% of a GP's workload from a patients' perspective.

Patient UK (www.patient.co.uk) is a labour of love. It has been around for years and is a great place to start for both doctors and patients. It really should be on any GPs desktop and well worth a look. It has a wonderful range of information leaflets that can be readily printed off and are clear concise and written in a clear style with diagrams.

The BBC has a site (www.bbc.co.uk/health/) with good additional links to other reputable resources.

The wired senior citizen may well take up the offer of a link to a relevant support website as they have the time, technology, confidence and ability to venture into this digital soup. You do need to know what's out there if you are to be of any value in guiding your patients.

Apps

New software developments have already given us a glimpse of what “Apps” can do. These small programs that run on “smart”

mobile phones can monitor your heart rate, weight and fitness as basic tricks but they are also being used by cardiologists to read ECGs in acute clinical situations. We are only just awakening to the power of Apps.

Social networking sites

The emerging influence of social networking services (Twitter and Facebook et al) has still to make a significant impact on how healthcare is going to be delivered to the elderly, but undoubtedly these services will develop.

Conclusion

The next internet innovations will be relevant for the currently middle aged who are waiting in the wings to become the next senior citizens. This age group will take with them greater information technology skills and experience but they are also likely to be outstripped by the technology and find themselves drowning in emerging swamps as they search to find some help for that shoulder that has started to stiffen.

Conflict of interest: none declared

References

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