

A Study of Patient and or Family Use of Alternative Sources of Healthcare Information

Licia D. Hurd*, Brenda Wood *, Loretta Forlaw, PhD, Mary Koehn, PhD, ARNP

School of Nursing, College of Health Professions

Abstract

Background: Healthcare consumers have access to a multitude of health related resources. The internet and other sources of healthcare information are prevalent, but little is known about patients' and families' use of these alternative sources of information. **Objective:** The purpose of this pilot study was to explore whether local healthcare consumers are seeking and/or using more alternative sources of health information related to their personal health care issues. **Method:** Self-report information was collected via a researcher-developed questionnaire from a convenience sampling of patients and/or family members, age 18 years or older, who had consented to completing the written questionnaire. **Results:** Approximately 35% of survey participants reported using the internet as a source for health care information; 46% reported using family and friends; while a greater percentage (69%) reported using their physician or nurse as a source for health care information. A higher percentage (19%) of respondents reported trusting the information received from their physician or nurse, while 7% strongly agreed to trusting web-based information. Among respondents who reported sharing the health information found with their doctor or nurse, 54% reported occasionally sharing this information; 27% reported always sharing, and 7% reported never sharing the health care information they found through alternative sources with their healthcare provider. **Conclusion:** In this study, there was not sufficient evidence to show that more local consumers used the internet, or other sources, to seek health care information. Approximately half of the respondents reported sharing this information with their healthcare providers. Health professionals have an opportunity to not only educate, inform, and engage patients and families in participating in decision-making related to their health care, but through communication, may increase the potential for greater health promotion and improved health outcomes.

1. Introduction

Today, many sources of healthcare information exist as resources for providing healthcare consumers with information on a multitude of health related topics. The internet and other sources of healthcare information are prevalent. It is believed that patients and their families are seeking these more alternative sources of information. It is assumed that they no longer rely solely on their healthcare providers for information related to their personal health care issues but seek to obtain or confirm the information via web based sites. The goal of this survey was to contribute to a better understanding of consumers' need to be kept well informed about issues related to their personal health care using web based information.

Studies have found that the internet is being used increasingly by healthcare consumers to access health-related information. Approximately 60-100 million people seek health information online [1]. An estimated 54 million consumers used the internet as a source for health information in 1998 to an estimated 110 million in 2002 [2].

While many reasons were given by consumers for seeking such health-related information, 53% reported sharing the information with their physician [3]. A Kaiser study also found that patients with chronic illnesses were more likely to use web-based information [4].

The aim of this study was to explore whether local healthcare consumers are seeking and/or using more alternative sources of health information related to their personal health care issues in order to provide more effective methods to educate, inform, and engage patients and families in participating in decision-making related to their health care.

2. Method

Participants and Settings

A convenience sample consisted of 26 patients and family members, age 18 years and older, from local healthcare facilities that consented to voluntary participation. During a one-day event, a self-report written questionnaire was used to collect data on patients and families that reported use of alternative sources of health information related to their personal health care issues.

3. Results

Approximately 69% of survey participants were age 65 and older, with nearly equal distribution of male and female participants. A majority of respondents (89%) were Caucasian (White) which was reflective of the population surveyed. Eighty-five percent of respondents reported that it was important to look up medical information about their health on their own, while 50% reported spending 15% or less time looking up this information. Among participants' reasons for seeking medical information, 46% reported using the information to understand their own personal health condition/disease process, while 23% used the information to understand the health condition/disease process of a family member or significant other, and 19% reported curiosity about health related subjects as their reason for seeking this information.

Of the reported sources of health information used, 35% reported using the internet, 46% reported obtaining the information from family and friends, and a larger percent (69%) reported using their doctor or nurse as a source for finding medical information about their health. A Likert scale was used to evaluate participants' responses to trusting the health care information they received from all sources used. The Likert scale showed a mean score of 2 (SD 0.756-1.236). Of these sources, 19% strongly agreed to trusting information received from their doctor or nurse, 15% strongly agreed to trusting information received from family and friends, while 7% strongly agreed to trusting information obtained from web-based sources. Participants were asked whether they felt they received adequate health related information from their doctor or nurse, among the respondents, 77% responded yes, 12% responded no. Among respondents who reported sharing the medical information found with their doctor or nurse, 54% reported occasionally sharing this information; 27% reported always sharing, and 7% reported never sharing this information with their health care provider.

4. Conclusions

In this pilot study, 69% of respondents continue to rely on physicians and nurses as a primary source of information related to their personal health care issues; yet 49% reported trusting the information received from these sources. Approximately half of the respondents reported sharing information found with their health provider.

Although in this pilot study there was not sufficient evidence to show that more local health care consumers are using the internet or other alternative sources of information, an important question that we may also have considered was whether participants had access to a computer and the internet.

In this pilot study we learned that several revisions to our questionnaire may be needed. For example, in order to clearly determine what total percentage of time respondents used in looking for information about their health, the survey question may need to be revised to indicate the time used in relation to a 24 hour day, week, or month. The mean scores on the Likert scale showed little variation (range = 2.00-2.56, SD 0.756-1.236) which suggest there may be a need to revise the statements. However, we conclude that there is sufficient evidence to warrant revision of the questionnaire and further investigate health consumers' use of alternative sources of health care information.

References

- [1] Cline, R.J.W., Haynes, K.M. (2001). Consumer health information seeking on the internet: The state of the art. *Health Education Research*, 16 (6), 671-692.
- [2] Akerkar, S.M., Kanitkar, M., Bichile, L.S. (2005). Use of the internet as a resource of health information by patients: A clinic-based study in the Indian population. *Journal of Postgraduate Medicine*, 51 (2), 116-118.
- [3] Bansil, P., Keenan, N.L., Zlot, A.I., Gilliland, J.C. (2006). Peer reviewed: Health-related information on the web: Results from the HealthStyles Survey, 2002-2003 [Electronic version]. *Preventing Chronic Disease: Public Health Research, Practice, and Policy*, 3 (2): A36.
- [4] Hsu, J., Huang, J., Kinsman, J., Fireman, B., Miller, R., Selby, J., et al. (2005). Use of e-health services between 1999 and 2002: A growing digital divide. *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, 12 (2), 164-171.