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New study to examine impact of the internet on healthcare

An in-depth study on the impact of the internet on healthcare is now underway in the UK.

Researchers from the Universities of Glasgow and Manchester are to examine how patients and carers use of the internet affects patient attitudes, patient-professional interaction, treatment selection and health outcomes.

Widespread use of the web has resulted in the emergence of so-called 'expert patients' and a corresponding decline in the deference traditionally accorded to professional judgement. The study aims to provide a detailed analysis of 'cybermedicine' which can be used to help redefine the nature and parameters of the healthcare encounter for the benefit of patients and carers in the future.

The research, funded by the NHS NIHR Service Delivery and Organisation Programme, has the following objectives:

- to quantify the extent and patterns of patients use of the Internet as a health information resource and identify the factors that lead to variations in behaviour arising from accessing information;
- to identify the search strategies employed by patients in accessing health information on the Internet and the evaluative approaches used in assessing the quality of available information;
- to analyse the membership, content and dynamics of virtual health communities and identify how participation in such communities is integrated into patients' engagement with healthcare services;
- to document and conceptualise the evolving nature of patient-professional interaction arising from patient access to healthcare information and the subsequent format of the healthcare encounter;
- to assess the effect of changing patient access to information and the renegotiation of the healthcare encounter on patterns of patient decision making, health behaviour and, where feasible, measurable health outcomes.

'The internet is changing the way we live our lives, affecting our attitudes and behaviours. The consequences of the internet for healthcare is profound, changing the expectations of patients and confronting professionals with new challenges. The image in the popular media is of hard-pressed doctors besieged by patients waving internet-printout. Yet such simplification disguise a much more complex pattern of change where increasing diversity of behaviour is the key change.'

The main research questions are:

- How and why do consumers use the Internet for healthcare information and services?
- What subsequent actions do they take and how does this affect their behaviour and health status?
- What is the degree of inequity in access to, and acceptability of, the Internet for health advice and information by people of different ages, gender, socio-economic class and ethnicity?
- What is the Internet's impact on patient self-management, decision making and health behaviour?
- What is the impact on patient-professional interaction arising from patient access to healthcare information on the Internet?

Multiple qualitative and quantitative data gathering techniques will be used in the study starting with surveys of the 'general population' and targeted respondents with the tracker conditions: cancer (breast and prostate), diabetes and depression. Further research on virtual health communities and patient health information evaluation will follow.

The research aims to help determine future NHS policy and strategic planning, and improve organisation and service delivery, training and development.

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Notes to Editors:

Research team on the 'Patients, Professionals and the Internet: Renegotiating the Healthcare Encounter' study -

Prof Angus Laing has managed numerous research projects, and written extensively in the area of professional services in the information age.

Prof Gillian Hogg has written and researched widely, and is an acknowledged authority on consumer involvement in service delivery contexts.

Prof Jackie Hayden bridges general practice and academia and specialises in standards and training approaches for primary care professionals.

Dr Terry Newholm specialises in consumer perspective research including the interpretive study of online healthcare communities.

Dr Shailey Minocha specialises in studying consumer search and evaluation strategies and interfaces in e-commerce and Internet sites generally.

Mr Edward Shiu is a statistician specialising in statistical modelling within the area of consumer behaviour.

Ms Linda Davies is a healthcare economist specialising in the quantitative evaluation of consumer perceived benefits from medical interventions.

Dr Diane Speier is a social scientist who specialises in qualitative health research in primary and secondary care.

Dr Debbie Keeling is a psychologist specialising in social networks, social support, motivation, learning and innovation, with interests in virtual communities.