

22nd October 2007

Is cybermedicine turning us into a nation of expert patients?

Researchers from Manchester Business School and The University of Glasgow are undertaking an in-depth study into the impact of cybermedicine, such as virtual health communities and self-help sites, on face-to-face healthcare.

Funded by the NHS National Institute of Health Research Service Delivery and Organisation Programme, the research responds to the rise of the "expert patient" – who uses cybermedicine to self-diagnose – and the decline in the deference traditionally linked to professional judgement.

The project examines how a patient's use of the internet affects their interaction with healthcare professionals, how they select the most appropriate treatment and most importantly, how it impacts upon their health. The study aims to provide a detailed analysis of cybermedicine, which will be used to help ensure patients receive the best possible choice of treatments and services from health professionals in the future.

Professor Angus Laing, The University of Glasgow said: "The internet is changing the way we live our lives and the consequences 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 disguises a much more complex pattern of change, where increasing diversity of behaviour is the key change."

The key aims of the project are:

- 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 research will focus on patients affected by cancer (breast and prostate), diabetes and depression. It aims to help determine future NHS policy and strategic planning, and improve organisation and service delivery, training and development.

If you are interested in taking part in the survey, please go to www.bewebhealthy.com.

This press release presents independent research commissioned by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Service Delivery and Organisation (SDO) Programme. The views expressed in this release are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health. The NIHR SDO programme is funded by the Department of Health.

ENDS

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.

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.