

049

Do health websites inform patients correctly?

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Objective:

To determine whether information provided by health websites helps patients to understand key questions about particular diseases.

Methods:

225 internet users (divided into three groups of 75 and balanced by sex) searched the internet for information on periventricular leucomalacia, rheumatoid arthritis and hemodialysis. Fifteen doctors (5 specialists for each subject) identified which key questions a patient should be able to answer for each disease. After an average of 35 minutes on line the internet navigators answered the specialists' questions. Their answers were subsequently assessed and marked by a single doctor who based his assessment on the correct answers provided by the specialists who had set the questions. Marks were awarded on a scale of nought (not answered) to five (very well answered).

Results:

In the instance of hemodialysis the average marks obtained for each of the questions varied between 1.28 and 5.0 (the maximum), in that of arthritis between 1.47 and 4.36 and of leucomalacia between 0.95 and 4.66. The highest average marks were for hemodialysis (3.10, t.d. 1.64), followed by arthritis (2.78, t.d. 1.57) and leucomalacia (2.57, t.d. 1.76). Only for some of the questions on leucomalacia (prognosis, detection of anomalies, help for children with medical repercussions, the possibility of recurrence in future pregnancies) were any differences between the sexes evident in terms of grades awarded ($p < 0.02$).

Conclusions:

Health information on the internet assists the understanding of processes and treatment, although, for the time being, it does not replace the work of the doctor in the consultancy.