

Finding High Quality Health Information Online

When it comes to finding healthcare information online, the Internet can be both a blessing and a curse. People can find information about almost anything, yet its accuracy and credibility are often questionable.

Matt Womack, the computer training librarian at Zurich, IL's Elia Area Public Library, is a firm believer in steering library patrons to only those medical Web sites that are accredited. He attended several classes and workshops to learn how to find quality health resources on the Internet, and now he teaches library patrons many of the skills he has acquired.

"Most justifiable online health sites now adhere to ethical codes and standards," says Womack. "If a site hasn't been reviewed for security and privacy issues, people should be very cautious."

The Educated Health Information Consumer

Womack's concerns are substantiated by research on Internet use. About six million people go online everyday to find medical advice, according to a May 2002 survey from the Pew Charitable Trust's Internet and American Life Project. But only 25 percent of those people check the source and timeliness of information and are vigilant about verifying the information's accuracy. *The Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that 70 percent of research studying the quality of health information on the Web has significant problems with the health information content when it is evaluated.

"With the profusion of health information on the Internet today and the amount of it that changes or becomes outdated, accreditation organizations are a must," says Womack. "They provide a framework for quality control and grant consumers access to current and reliable information."

Health Web Sites and Accreditation

Womack's online health workshops focus on directing patrons to accredited Web sites. The classes are monthly, two hours in length and attended by more than a dozen patrons. He begins by demonstrating how to navigate Web sites associated with the National Institute of Health's MedlinePlus®, the Mayo Clinic, WebMD, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Illinois Department of Public Health, among others (see below for links).

Womack recommends that library patrons look for the accreditation seals from at least one of two different accrediting agencies on each site they visit. The American Accreditation HealthCare Commission (URAC) is a leading private non-profit organization that works with health care companies and puts them through rigorous evaluation processes to measure their ability to meet more than 50 quality standards. URAC has issued over 1,800 accreditation certificates to more than 500 managed care programs and specialty health care organizations in all 50 states. URAC claims that if

you see its Accreditation Seal, “you can be confident that you are visiting a trustworthy site.”

Another agency Womack recommends is The Health on the Net Foundation (HON), which was created in 1995 by a non-profit international Swiss Organization located in Geneva. In March of 1996 the site became one of the first Universal Resource Locators (URLs) to guide health consumers and medical professionals to reliable sources of information on the Internet.

The HON Code of Ethics (HONcode) identifies a set of rules to ensure that Web site developers present information complying with basic ethical standards; as a result, readers can know the exact source and the purpose of the data they are reading. Approximately 3,000 sites are formal HONcode subscribers that have a unique ID number and are indexed by HON. About 80 percent of these sites are U.S.-based, but the proportion of European and other non-U.S. sites is growing. HONcode is available now in 17 languages.

Both accrediting agencies help to ensure that health Web sites abide by a certain standard and address issues that are important to consumers, including privacy and security, disclosure, how content is developed and revised, how the site links itself to other sites, and the organization behind the site.

“People feel more in control of their health situations when they are well-educated and aware of all the resources that may be just a click away. That’s why it is important for consumers to know how to find health information—physicians’ backgrounds and track records, medication interactions, specific medical conditions—on Web sites that are fully accredited and accurate,” says Womack.

Useful Links, References, and Top Accredited Medical Web Sites

- American Accreditation HealthCare Commission (URAC). <http://urac.org>
- Ela Area Public Library. <http://www.eapl.org>
- Health on the Net Foundation’s (HON) HonCode. <http://www.hon.ch>
- Pew Charitable Trust’s Internet and American Life Project. <http://www.pewinternet.org>
- Fox, Suzannah and Lee Rainie. (2002). “Vital decisions: How Internet users decide what information to trust when they or their loved ones are sick.” http://www.pewtrusts.com/pdf/vf_pew_internet_health_searches.pdf
- The Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.hhs.gov>
- The Illinois Department of Public Health. <http://www.idph.state.il.us/home.htm>
- The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA). <http://jama.ama-assn.org>
- Eysenbach G, Powell J, Kuss O, Sa ER. (2002). Empirical studies assessing the quality of health information for consumers on the World Wide Web: A systematic review. JAMA 287, 2691-2700.

Popular URAC and HON accredited health sites:

- Aetna Intellihealth. <http://www.intelihealth.com>
- American Specialty Health Networks (ASHN). <http://www.healthyroads.com>
- Animated Dissection of Anatomy for Medicine (A.D.A.M.). <http://www.adam.com>
- Drkoop. <http://www.drkoop.com>
- Group Health Incorporated. <http://www.ghi.com>
- HealthCentral.com. <http://www.healthcentral.com>
- Healthwise. <http://www.healthwise.org>
- Health Insurance Association of America <http://www.hiaa.org>
- Laurus Health. <http://www.laurushealth.com>
- Mayo Clinic. <http://www.mayohealth.org>
- Med411.com. <http://www.Med411.com>
- National Library of Medicine/National Institutes of Health (NLM/NIH) MedlinePlus.® <http://www.medlineplus.gov>
- Personal MD. <http://www.personalmd.com>
- Veritas Medicine <http://www.veritasmedicine.com>
- WebMD. <http://www.webmd.com>
- WellMed, Inc. <http://www.wellmed.com>

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