

ORAL SESSION 8: EXPERIENCED HEALTH AND (SELF) RESPECT

Older people seeking health information before seeing a doctor

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Purpose In the past, many people owned a medical dictionary where they could look up information on symptoms, conditions and treatments, and on general health conditions. Although there is a digital divide between younger and older cohorts, an increasing number of older people are now using the internet. In England, the number of those aged 60 – 64 who used the internet increased from 32% to 79% between 2002 and 2012 (Matthews, Nazroo & Marshall, 2019). The oldest old, aged 80+, increased their use from 7% to 26%. Online health information can range from personal accounts of illnesses and patient discussion groups to peer reviewed journal articles and clinical decision-making support tools. This research study reviews this research evidence. **Method** The empirical component of the research involved qualitative interviews with 14 older people. There were 7 men and 7 women and they ranged in age from the 60s to the late 80s. They were interviewed in North London, England in a University of the Third Age building. They are therefore not a representative group but the findings are consistent and form a pilot study which can be built on for future research. **Results and discussion** The findings to be discussed can be summarised:

a. Use of the internet to seek health information: There was daily use of the internet by all participants. They all said that they would still go to their GP (family doctor) if they were worried about severe health problems irrespective of internet use. The benefits of seeking health information included a sense of empowerment and being in control.

b. The reliability/legitimacy of websites: This cohort primarily consulted official websites which they deemed legitimate. The most popular was the National Health Service website as well as Royal College sites and those of voluntary bodies such as Diabetes UK. Caution was expressed over the reliability of websites and there was an awareness of sites sponsored by food/drink industries and 'fake news'.

c. Interactions with the GP: We hypothesised that using the internet would encourage attendance at the GP surgery, making them fear more sinister diagnoses or cancer. This was not the case. In some cases, it dissuaded patients from consulting their GP. The internet was often used as a back up to validate minor concerns. There was also a culture of concealment from the GP including fear of insulting their GP or being disrespectful towards the profession. There are many policy implications arising from this research. This includes the need for accurate health information on the web and the acknowledgement that patients are becoming more knowledgeable and informed. There is need for patient advice on 'fake' health news online. The training of doctors should include the influence of the internet on older patient's health beliefs and decision-making. These policy implications will be discussed in the presentation.

References

Matthews, K., Nazroo, J. & Marshall, A. (2019). Digital inclusion in later life: cohort changes in internet use over a ten-year period in England. *Ageing and Society*, 32(9), 1914–1932. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X18000326>

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