

The Internet as a Source of Health Information Among Singaporeans: Prevalence, Patterns of Health Surfing and Impact on Health Behaviour

T R Siow,* , I P T Soh,* , S Sreedharan,* , S Das De,* , P P Tan,* , A Seow,**_{FAMS, MBBS, MD}, K C Lun,**_{PhD}

Abstract

Objective: The Internet is an increasingly popular source of healthcare information. This study describes the prevalence of health surfers in Singapore and their health-surfing patterns. It also assesses their confidence in online health information and the impact the Internet has on health-seeking behaviour. **Materials and Methods:** A cross-sectional survey using a standardised questionnaire was carried out among residents aged 13 to 55 years in 1852 units in Bishan North. These units were selected by single-stage simple random cluster sampling method. **Results:** The household response rate was 51% (n = 950) and the individual response rate was 69% (n = 1646). Responding and non-responding households were similar in terms of ethnicity and housing type. Of the responders, 62.9% surfed the Internet and 37.7% have surfed for health information. Health surfers tended to be younger (20 to 39 years) and have higher education status. Indians were also more likely than other ethnic groups to surf for health. Professional health-related sites comprised the majority (68%) of sites visited, and the most common search keywords concern chronic degenerative diseases, e.g. hypertension. The top preferred sources of health information were doctors (25.9%), the Internet (25.3%) and the traditional mass media (20.5%). Almost half (45.1%) considered online health information trustworthy if it was from a professional source or if the website displayed the source, while 10.6% trusted the information if it concurred with the doctors' advice. The vast majority (91.7%) had taken some action in response to the information. **Conclusion:** The Internet is being used as an accessible source of health information by a substantial proportion of the lay public. While this can facilitate greater partnership in healthcare, it underlines the need for doctors to be pro-active in the practice of evidence-based medicine, and for guidelines to enable patients to use this tool in a discerning manner.

Ann Acad Med Singapore 2003; 32:807-13

Key words: Credibility, Health websites, Prevalence survey

* Medical Undergraduate

** Associate Professor

Department of Community, Occupational and Family Medicine, NUS

*** Associate Professor

Department of Community, Occupational and Family Medicine, NUS

Currently Professor and Vice-Dean

School of Biological Sciences, Nanyang Technological University

Address for Reprints: Dr Adeline Seow, Department of Community, Occupational and Family Medicine, Faculty of Medicine MD3, 16 Medical Drive, Singapore 117597.