How patients use online sources for information

In this article...

- A patient’s perspective of going online to get information about his illness
- How to ascertain whether online information is reliable
- How to ensure patients access information that is accurate

Patient’s perspective

In 2003, Kevin MacCabe was diagnosed with PSC. When he was given this diagnosis, he was told there was no cure and it was likely that he would eventually need a liver transplant.

When Mr MacCabe got home he immediately looked up PSC on the internet. During his search, he came across the PSC Support Group, as well as with reliable and unreliable information about his condition. His quest for knowledge encouraged him to join the liver patient and public involvement panel, and contribute to research on improving treatments for liver disease.

Mr MacCabe’s experience is outlined in Box 1.

Nurse’s perspective

Websites and social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Myspace, Yahoo Answers, LinkedIn and Wikipedia, along with blogs, online forums, message boards and chatrooms, have become important channels for disseminating and sharing health information, and for learning about health. Rozenblum and Bates (2013) say patients are becoming more engaged in their healthcare and use the internet to share and rate experiences.

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Box 1. How to ensure patients access information that is accurate

1. Patients should be given accurate information and advised on reliable sources
2. Patients need to identify reliable healthcare websites
3. Health professionals need to identify reliable healthcare websites
4. Good patient communication from the outset builds rapport and trust
5. Nurses who are competent in using the internet for healthcare can empower patients to be involved in their own care

How to ensure patients access information that is accurate

1. Nurse should be aware of online information and its risks and benefits for patients
2. Patients should be given accurate information and advised on reliable sources
3. Health professionals need to identify reliable healthcare websites
4. Good patient communication from the outset builds rapport and trust
5. Nurses who are competent in using the internet for healthcare can empower patients to be involved in their own care

BOX 2. HOW TO EVALUATE A WEBSITE

Check the following to evaluate whether a website is reliable and valid:
- Ownership – who owns the website? Is it for commercial use?
- Authors – are they appropriately qualified professionals?
- Review – who reviews the information for reliability and validity?
- Timeliness – is the content up to date?
- Credibility and support – does the information sound credible and truthful, and is it cited elsewhere?
- References – is the information supported by credible references?

Source: Thrower (2006)
of their results, letters and care plans, provided by authors with no interest in anything other than patients’ health. Care must now go beyond the “traditional” nursing model. Nurses should adhere to local and national guidelines when giving patients more choice and opportunities about what they can do to manage their health. A nurse who is both confident and competent in the use of the internet for healthcare can empower and facilitate patients to become safe, active participants in their own healthcare.

**Demystifying information**

Mr MacCabe said information from the internet complemented but did not replace that from his clinical team. Clinical staff can help patients put information in perspective and personalise concerns that might not be so bad after all. Telephone conversations between patients and health professionals involved in their care is important for both (Felkey et al, 2006); it is crucial that patients are able to call practitioners if they feel anxious about information they have found online.

**Conclusion**

The internet and social media have changed how patients access information and nurses need to not only understand the impact and implications of this but also change the way we deliver care. Care must now go beyond the “traditional” nursing model. Nurses should adhere to local and national guidelines when giving patients more choice and opportunities about what they can do to manage their health. A nurse who is both confident and competent in the use of the internet for healthcare can empower and facilitate patients to become safe, active participants in their own healthcare.

**References**

Carbone M, Neuberger JM (2014) Autoimmune liver disease, autoimmunity and liver transplantation.

**For more on this topic go online...**

- **Using social networks to help patients self-care**
- **Bit.ly/NTSocMedia**

**BOX 3: RELIABLE WEBSITES**

- British Liver Trust: www.britishlivertrust.org.uk
- BASL Clinical Communities: www.basl.clinicalcommunities.net
- HealthUnlocked: www.healthunlocked.com/britishlivertrust
- NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk
- Patient.co.uk: www.patient.co.uk
- My Health, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham (myhealth@QEH): www.uhb.nhs.uk/myhealth-at-qehb.htm
- PSC Support: www.pscsupport.org.uk

**Online courses and resources for nurses:**

- Nursing Times Learning’s online learning unit Liver Disease: Risk Factors and Treatment: tinyurl.com/NTL-Liver;
- Liver Disease: Looking After Your Liver, a free online course available through the University of Birmingham, due to start 27 October 2014 (tinyurl.com/BhamUni-Liver)