

What are Patients Seeking When They Turn to the Internet? Qualitative Content Analysis of Questions Asked by Visitors to an Orthopaedics Website

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ABSTRACT:

Background: More people than ever are turning to the Internet for health-related information, and recent studies indicate that the information patients find online directly affects the decisions they make about their healthcare. Little is known about the information needs or actual search behavior of people who use the Internet for health information. **Objective:** This study analyzes what people search for when they use a health education website offering information about arthritis, orthopaedics, and sports medicine topics. Additionally, it determines who is performing these searches: is it patients, friends/relatives of patients, or neither? Finally, it examines the similarities and differences among questions submitted by website visitors from different countries. **Methods:** Content analysis was performed on 793 free-text search queries submitted to a patient education website owned and operated by the Department of Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine at the University of Washington Medical Center. The 793-query data set was coded into three schemes: (1) the purpose of the query, (2) the topic of the query, and (3) the relationship between the asker of the query and the patient. We determined the country from which each query was submitted by analyzing the Internet Protocol addresses associated with the queries. **Results:** The five most common reasons visitors searched the website were to seek: (1) information about a condition, (2) information about treatment, (3) information about symptoms, (4) advice about symptoms, and (5) advice about treatment. We were able to determine the relationship between the person submitting the query and the patient in question for 178 queries. Of these, the asker was the patient in 140 cases, and the asker was a friend or relative of the patient in 38 cases. The queries were submitted from 34 nations, with most coming from the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada. When comparing questions submitted from the US versus those from all other countries, the three most common types of questions were the same for both groups (and were the top three question types listed above). **Conclusions:** These results provide the UW Department of Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine, as well as other organizations who provide health information websites, with data about what people around the world are seeking when they turn to the Internet for health information. If website managers can adapt their health information websites in response to these findings, patients may be able to find and use Internet-based health information more successfully, enabling them to participate more actively in their healthcare.

KEY WORDS: Internet; information retrieval; patients; orthopedics