

Mass of data online impedes HCP access

Survey shows doctors revert to the easiest route when trying to find information, as they spend too long searching for 'trusted' sites

The range of types and sources of medical content available to doctors has grown exponentially, as has the level of access that doctors have to this content via digital channels. On the face of it, doctors are increasingly better supported by publishers of medical information online. But are they? A recent study by EPG Health Media highlights the evolution of obstacles for healthcare professionals (HCPs) seeking information online.

The survey set out to determine how doctors seek information online, what the most popular types of information are and how they can be best presented to serve the needs of medical professionals. When designing the study, EPG did not consider that the answers to these questions would become of less significance than what later became its key finding.

Of no surprise was the fact that all respondents, HCPs in Europe, were using the internet for professional purposes or that 79 per cent spent at least an hour each day doing so. Neither was it particularly surprising that 63 per cent of respondents stated that they preferred the internet to printed materials, meetings/congress and information supplied by drug reps.

Arguably the most surprising finding from the study was that, despite the plethora of information available online, 64 per cent of respondents spent more than a quarter of their total online time 'searching' for content as opposed to actually engaging with the content they hoped to find.

Doctors spent hours each day plodding through the online space, seeking information on topics such as diagnostic tools, journal publications, educational content, drug data, continuing medical education (CME), conference details and news. However, when asked why they did not spend more time engaging with these various types of information, 61 per cent cited a 'lack of time'. For this reason, 50 per cent (of all respondents) frequently settled for the information they found most quickly online, rather than continuing until they found the information they would want ideally.

Convenience over quality

The implication is that physicians are not necessarily finding the right information online as often as they should and frequently choose to access content based on convenience rather than quality. For example, 81 per cent of respondents accessed medical information on Wikipedia at least 'occasionally'; however, only 31 per cent of them considered this to be a valuable source of information, which may imply that doctors mainly use it for ease or convenience.

The considerable growth in online medical content has not necessarily resulted in better access for HCPs, as might be reasonably thought. In fact, it may have contributed to the barriers. It would seem that doctors are not entirely satisfied with the level of access they have to medical information online. At least 50 per cent of respondents indicated that they required better access to diagnosis tools, journal publications, educational content, drug information, CME, conference reports, medical news, mobile apps and patient education materials.

So, on the one hand, HCPs are overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of content available to them on the web (33 per cent believed that 'too many sources of information' created a barrier) and, on the other hand, the majority reported that they required better access. At first sight, this may appear to be a contradiction but, in fact, the two are closely linked. The term 'access' is not simply about ticking a box to confirm that the content exists and that it is available to doctors in the digital space. Simply existing does not guarantee any level of access or engagement. To optimise 'access', factors such as demand, convenience, format and trust, must be taken into account, all of which present potential barriers to doctors and influence the way they search online.

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In terms of how physicians would 'ideally' find the right information online, respondents preferred to use professional speciality websites to initiate their online search for medical information, with 79 per cent 'always' or 'often' doing so, followed by general professional websites (55 per cent), search engines (53 per cent) and pharmaceutical websites (23 per cent). The reason for this may be linked to trust – 57 per cent of respondents stated that 'knowing which sources to trust' was an impediment to sourcing medical information online. Helping HCPs to overcome those access barriers and facilitating their online journey is key to getting them engaged with content online.

Whether pharma should be providing doctors with more digital information is without question; the demand is overwhelmingly apparent and it could even be considered an obligation. The question is how to ensure that today's busy doctors can find, access, trust and engage with that valuable content quickly and easily? Answers to this question must be sought by any medical publisher, pharma brand team, healthcare communications or marketing agency before their content or strategy can be successfully rolled out into the digital space.

For further information on the survey, download the full free report, *'The online behaviour and preferences of European HCPs'* at:

www.epghealthmedia.com/industry-reports

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