

Online Consumer Health Information in Pakistan

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Abstract

The intrinsic potential of online consumer health information has been realized in recent times by the public and private health sector establishment and personnel in Pakistan. However this realization is still not as widespread or phenomenal as its penetration and impact on the general public is concerned. This article outlines a review of online health resources available in Pakistan, with an analysis of their demand and use. This is not an exhaustive survey that would include all health websites. It covers only the most popular and useful websites available. It is comprehensible that the content as well as the information available through these websites varies and could not be analyzed uniformly.

Keywords: Consumer health; Health information; Online health information; Pakistan

Introduction

Most people use the term Consumer Health Information (CHI) as an umbrella term which may include patient information, health information, health guidelines or clues to reach an informed and quality decision about their health. In this study we will discuss the definition of the term CHI, its possible connotations and its effect on society and peoples health. Online Consumer Health Information (OCHI) in Pakistan is in its formative phase and still

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has not emerged as a popular method of health information gathering and access. Nevertheless, it is expected to be an extensively reliable medium for accessing Information within a decade due to the increase in computer-literate population and a wider access to the internet. This study aims to investigate the web-based OCHI scenario in the country.

Objectives of the Study

- 1) To identify benefits of OCHI in an informed society.
- 2) To review the developments in OCHI in Pakistan during last decade.
- 3) To identify the salient features of popular Consumer Health Information websites in Pakistan.

Design of Study

A survey of OCHI Websites in Pakistan was conducted by selecting the most popular websites and analyzing them on the basis their information content rather than their design and appearance. A number of health institutions, NGOs and individuals are untiringly determined to spread health information to the general public through the Internet. We have not critically evaluated individual websites because these efforts are still in their infancy, and at this early stage they are more in need of approval than otherwise. Therefore, this study is more of an introduction of the available OCHI Websites. The selection of websites is based on the personal consultations with physicians, medical students and library friends.

Defining 'Consumer Health Information'

The term, "Consumer Health Information" is understood differently by different people belonging to various socio-economic backgrounds. Harris (2006) has emphasized the need for coining a proper definition in this regard as follows:

The term CHI needs definition. It is imprecise and ambiguous; we may think of it as patient information, but that can sometimes mean instructions, at other times patient records. In the patient's mind, it's anything they need or want in healthcare access. The true scope of consumer health information is huge and diverse - broad, personal, and specific needs.

Rees (1998) in his book "Consumer Health: Information Source Book," quotes a comprehensive definition of the concept by Kevin Patrick and Shannah Koss as follows:

CHI is defined as any information that enables individuals to understand their health and make health-related decisions for themselves and families. This includes information supporting individual and community-based health promotion and enhancement, self-care, shared (professional-patient) decision making, patient education and rehabilitation, using the health care system and selecting insurance or a provider, and peer-group support ... The nature of CHI can be economic, technical, logistical and/or qualitative. It is available in health care settings as well as such locations as homes, schools, libraries, worksites, stores, and other arena open and accessible to all (p. 1).

Online Health Information

More and more people today use the Internet. According to an estimate, there are about one billion computers connected to the Internet. Greenberg, et al. (2004) state that "Searches for health information are among the most common reasons that consumers use the Internet." Baker, et al. (2003) mention that according to a National Survey in USA, "40% people who have Internet access use it to access health and medical information."

Cline & Haynes (2001) state that globally there were “more than 70,000 websites that disseminate health information, in excess of 50 million people seek health information online.”

It is obvious from this discussion that people in developed countries heavily depend on the Internet for searching the health information. This is becoming true also for computer literate populations in developing countries in South Asia and other regions of the world.

Use of Internet in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the consumers seeking health information, counseling and guidance have been traditionally relying heavily on print, radio or television. Books have also been a primary source for CHI. Books such as Family Health Encyclopedias, and general books on health and fitness have been used for long. Health literature published in local languages of Pakistan is mostly based on the translations of health literature from developed countries. Institutions such as Hamdard Foundation also play important role in health awareness for public; their emphasis, however, resides primarily on the Unani or Eastern System of Medicine.

The public use of Internet in Pakistan started from the city of Karachi in 1995, ‘Digicom’ being the first company to provide public Internet connections. In 1996 Pakistan Telecommunication Corporation Limited issued licenses to 16 companies for supply of e-mail and Internet services. Pakistan, at that time was the first country in South Asia to open up ISP market for the private sector. Musharraf (2006), the President of Pakistan, traces the development of telecommunication in the country during last seven years as follows:

In 1999, only thirty-nine cities in Pakistan were connected to the Internet. By 2006, 2,000 cities and towns were connected to it. In 1999, fiber-optic connectivity was limited to only about forty towns; today 1,000 towns have it,In only three years, from 2003 to 2006, teledensity, which is

the number of telephones as a percentage of the population, has increased from a meager 2.9 percent to 16 percent; cell phones have increased from 600,000 to over 30 million; and wireless local loop is taking root in the rural areas (p. 198).

The Ministry of Finance (2005-2006), quoting The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), has mentioned the number of Internet subscribers in Pakistan to be 2.1 million. However, the real number of Internet users is much more than that, as most of the home subscribers share the same telephone connection for all family members in one household and institutional users such as schools and colleges provide access to several users including their students and faculty through limited connection subscriptions. Due to compulsory computer and Internet education as a curriculum component at high school level, there is a tremendous increase in the number of computer literate teens and young adults.

Similarly, the Internet-cafes provide Internet access to a large number of public users. A marketing agency has put the number of active Internet users in Pakistan to 8 million. Keeping in view such a high number of Internet users in a population of 140 million people in a developing country, it is difficult to underestimate the importance of Internet as a useful medium of OCHI in Pakistan.

Health Information Websites in Pakistan

Pakistan is a developing country where there is a dire need for improvement in existing health education & awareness services in order to improve the social and economic condition of the public. However, like other developing countries of South Asian region, Pakistan is also facing complex challenges especially in the health sector. Our health information needs are different from those of the developed countries; for example, our priority issues are: high infant & maternal mortality rates; nutrition; infectious diseases and so on.

In Pakistan, the public, private and NGO sectors and the World Health Organization are playing a vital role to increase awareness about Health and Nutrition and Infectious diseases. Due to low literacy rate (i.e., 40-45%) in the country, a majority of people are not aware of the CHI resources.

The role of CHI is vital for the Health of people. CHI keeps people informed of their rights, enabling their participation in decision-making regarding their health and their right of equal access to health care. The CHI ought to be concise, reliable, meaningful, racially and linguistically appropriate. If the people get timely access to CHI, they can make comparison among the available choices and able to make right decisions.

The CHI has for long been available in the country through conventional media such as print (books, booklets, brochures, pamphlets, handouts); radio and television. Recently, the use of Internet for access and spread of health information is gaining momentum because it is a quick and easy to access medium. The other reason is that many health institutions, NGOs and individuals are working hard to make useful health information available to the general public on missionary grounds. This article provides an introduction of selected health websites that are popular in Pakistan. This review may not be comprehensive and there is a possibility that some useful website/s might have been overlooked. Nevertheless, the current selection is to a great extent, representative of indigenous CHI available on the Internet for the people of Pakistan.

Health Websites

1. Pakmedinet (www.pakmedinet.com)

PakMediNet (2006) is a voluntary website, maintained by Pakistani physicians volunteering to promote Pakistan-based researches and medical journals on Internet. The website provides instant access to the Pakistani Drug Index, Pakistani Medical Journals Index and Abstracts Online, and

also a searchable list of 42 Pakistani health journals. The Online Pakistani Drug Index is easy to use and drugs can be searched by generic as well as trade names. The Pakistani medical journals can be searched online by keywords, author, title and abstracts. This website provides access to current research on local and national health problems. Pharmaceutical Company Description includes company address, phone and contact details. The pakmedinet.com also provides online discussion forum regarding topics of public interest for registered users and the registration is free.

2. Telemedpak (www.telmedpak.com)

Telemedpak (2006) is maintained by the students of Rawalpindi Medical College and provides health news, articles and links to other medical websites. Registration is required to obtain full access to the discussion forum and clinical articles. There is plenty of information for lay persons on mother & child health, family planning, nutrition, healthy living, etc. The website also provides 'Ask A Doctor' service for general public on dermatology, pain, and healthy mom & healthy child clinic.

3. Medisure (www.medisure.com.pk)

Medisure (2006) claims to be Pakistan's first medical information portal, launched in year 2000. The portal enables physicians and consumers to access health information. The Medical Emergencies is a must read section. The website provides daily health news and articles. List of online doctors is available for selection by the patients and online queries can be sent to the doctors. The website provides links to Pakistani medical colleges, pharmaceutical companies and a number of Pakistani hospitals.

4. Pakdoctor (2006) (www.pakdoctor.com)

The Pakistan Medical Association (PMA) maintains this portal. PMA has the largest number of physician members in the

country. The portal is equally important for the physicians and general public due to its following rich contents:

- a) General Public Section provides general tips for health issues, personal care and health advice.
- b) Ask the expert feature provides free health advice. Information is available for various groups such as kids health, teenage health, men's health, women health, maternity guide, etc. It provides articles, complete guides and useful health tips for each category.

5. Ministry of Health (<http://www.health.gov.pk/>)

The Ministry of Health (2006), Government of Pakistan's website has only one feature for general public consumers. The Health News Section provides recent health guideline and news, guideline for recent outbreak of Dengue fever is also available on the website.

6. Aga Khan University Hospital
(<http://www.aku.edu/akuh/patientcare/pinfo/index.shtml>)

The patient care section of Aga Khan University (2006) website provides online brochures for various health topics and procedures related to heart diseases, family medicine, neurology, obstetrics & gynecology, psychiatry, radiology, emergency medicine and surgery. Clinical schedules, information about surgical procedures and the hospital registration procedure is also available.

7. Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital & Research
Centre (<http://www.shaukatkhanum.org.pk/cancerfacts.htm>)

The Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital and Research Centre (2006) is the biggest cancer hospital in the country. Its website provides information about cancer and links to international resources. Information on procedures and packages, clinical schedules and registration procedures with cancer

statistics are available. Information brochures on breast cancer, chemotherapy, having an operation, mammography, post mastectomy exercises and radiotherapy are available.

8. Sindh Institute of Urology & Transplantation (SIUT)
(http://www.siut.org/Patient_Information.htm)

SIUT is the largest health organization in Pakistan which provides free and comprehensive services in urology, nephrology, and transplantation & gastroenterology. The SIUT website presents patient guidance through clinical schedules. Patient information includes topics such as dialysis, stone diseases and hematuria (blood in urine). Annual report of SIUT, patient statistics and information about patient services is also available.

9. Daily Dawn (<http://www.dawn.com/weekly/dmag/dmag.htm>)

The most popular English language daily Dawn's Sunday magazine publishes health section. Doctors answer health questions asked by general public. This feature creates awareness on general and particular health issues.

10. Daily Jang (<http://www.jang.com.pk/jang/nov2006-weekly/sunmag-12-11-2006/page6.htm>)

The most popular and generally read international Urdu language newspaper "Jang" publishes "Health and Fitness" page/s in its weekly Sunday magazine. This weekly feature is popular for simplicity of its language and lay treatment of subjects with most recent expert knowledge.

Some Shortcomings

The review of these websites reveals following shortcomings:

- The websites under review do not provide expert literature or content; similarly these websites also do not provide comprehensive coverage of the subject/s.
- Users are usually not directed towards other important reference sources and literature on the subject or topic.
- Another obvious short coming is that most of the websites are not updated regularly for providing current information and literature.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The OCHI has made a humble but interesting beginning in Pakistan. The consumers are slowly becoming aware of local health information available on the Internet. Presently, most of the Internet users rely heavily on international search engines like Google, Yahoo, etc. Due to the spread and use of Internet to rural & remote areas of Pakistan, now consumers have a choice to get health-related information and expert advice without wasting time, and money.

The number of information providers, in general, is increasing. Hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, health service related associations and NGOs have initiated a few websites within their limited resources to provide Consumer Health Information.

The Ministry of Health, Government of Pakistan has yet to play its role to provide financial and infrastructural support to hospitals and health institutions for online health information projects in public & private sector. It is our understanding that with the increase in computer literate population, the OCHI will be a highly reliable resource for health information in Pakistan in near future.

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