

Health-Related Information and the Internet

It has now become commonplace for patients to present healthcare professionals with information regarding pharmaceutical and medical information downloaded from the Internet. Some even place considerable pressure on healthcare professionals to bow to their requests based on the information obtained.

We therefore need to be equipped with the necessary skills in order to guide our patients with regards to the retrieval and appropriate use of such information.

The Internet has today become an integral part of our lives and at times we wonder what life was like without it. It is an infinite source of information, which is extremely valuable, provided that it originates from reliable sources. The very same information, which is presented to us, is also presented to our patients. Due to our training we can, in most cases, distinguish between a reliable and non-reliable source, and can also interpret the data presented to us. These are two very important advantages which we have over our patients, and which at times they may not fully appreciate.

While we should always encourage our patients to seek information regarding health-related issues, as this would help them to better participate in the management of their condition, possibly leading to better outcomes, we need to be more proactive in ensuring that they are getting the right information. Clearly we have no control over what is accessible through the Internet; we can however pinpoint

certain common indicators which should trigger an alert. Products described or marketed with the following phrases should be viewed with caution:

- 'natural' usually implying absolute safety and efficacy i.e. may be used by anyone, without experiencing any side-effects to definitely obtain a desired result;
- declarations from 'cured' individuals and 'famous' medical experts;
- any one product that can cure or treat a list of symptoms or diseases e.g. from cancer to wrinkles;
- advertisements for products which are 'fashionable' with the 'offer' being available for a limited amount of time;
- claims that a product is 'scientifically proven' or 'without risk'.

Patients should also be informed of the risks of buying products over the Internet. Serious problems could arise due to safety and efficacy. The risk of initiating self-treatment or changing therapy without prior consultation with healthcare professionals is also a serious threat.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recognised this problem and has issued a guide entitled Medical Products and the Internet. This provides assistance in identifying reliable and independent sources of information on medical products. This guide may be accessed at <http://www.who.int/medicines/library/qsm/who-edm-qsm-99-4/medicines-on-internet-guide.html>

It is ironic that, in this day and age, we insist on selecting and tailoring therapy according to the individuals' needs providing them with the best possible treatment, yet they are enticed to participate in a system which offers the least individualised approach. On selecting the latter system they are forgoing the opportunity for professional care and advice from their doctors, pharmacists and other healthcare professionals. It is therefore up to us to guide patients to utilise the Internet to support and complement professional care. ★

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c/o Department of Pharmacy,
University of Malta, Msida
Tel: (356) 2340 2899
(356) 2134 3764
Fax: (356) 2134 0427**

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Editor in Chief

Maria Cordina maria.cordina@um.edu.mt

Editorial Board

Claude Farrugia claudio.farrugia@um.edu.mt

Anthony Fenech anthony.fenech@um.edu.mt

Edith Sciberras boxed@mail.global.net.mt

Email: mcpharm@yaho.com

Website: <http://www.geocities.com/mcpharm>

The Malta College of Pharmacy Practice

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