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## Use of Internet for medical information by patients & its impact on Consultation time- A Patient Survey

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### ABSTRACT

Though the internet has revolutionized the world with access and availability of information, health texts needs more regulation as it does seem to start having an impact on the consultation times as seen in our patient survey. Is this the beginning of a change for the physician-patient relationship model in the Internet age?

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## **Introduction**

The use of Internet for health information has been on a constant rise as revealed by literature (1-3). Recent studies have suggested the use of the Internet by patients not only in the developed but also in the developing third world countries has been constantly evolving. Possibly this is due to the fact of a general trend of rising Internet usage amongst the population. Studies by various sources including academic researchers and the patients have suggested the increase use of internet for health information could possibly have a positive impact towards more patient centered and controlled or equitable relationships between the clinician and patients(4-8). However one must be aware about the lack of regulators in this area resulting in inappropriate & inaccurate information, which could lead to misinterpretation causing a strain on the physician and patient relationship.

There have been reports of an emerging consumerist model with patient-Web- physician triangulation that can significantly impact the dynamics of the physician-patient relationship (9).

## **Objectives**

To assess whether prior Internet search of their symptoms has an effect on the Consultation time in our general ENT clinics. Secondly to compare the Consultation times between Internet user & Internet non-user patient groups.

## **Methods**

Recent years have seen an enormous growth in the number of studies relating to the Internet with some of the studies mostly focused on web sites, physician –patient relationship and others on social groups using internet resources. Given the present pressure on our health care system, we wanted to focus the impact of the Internet on our consultation times in the general ENT clinics.

As part of the study, we included 51 new patients between April-May 2016 in this patient survey from our general ENT outpatient clinics. Use of Microsoft excel was used to analyze the data. Gold standard of 20 minutes as recommended by the ENT UK was used. Senior clinicians were mostly involved in conducting these clinics. Patients were provided a questionnaire prior to their

appointment in the waiting area and were asked to fill in. The outpatient nursing staff recorded the entry and exit time of the patient from the consultation room.

## **Results**

Our survey revealed 41% (21 patients) had prior Internet information relating to the symptoms and 59% (30 patients) were Internet non-users. Hence we divided our sample into Internet users and Internet non-users groups.

Further amongst the Internet users group of 21 patients 29% (6 patients) mentioned about having an idea about their diagnosis based on the web search whereas 71% (15 patients) were still unsure as the web was quite confusing. 38% (8 patients) of this Internet users group had further questions that needed clarification by the clinician but 48% (10 patients) had no questions relating to their symptoms or possible diagnosis, which is interesting. Google was the most popular search engine used by 76% (16 patients) followed by 14 % (3 patients) who were unsure about the search engine and 5% (1 patient) used YouTube and 5% (1 patient) used the NHS website. Average time spent on the Internet was 30 minutes with the spectrum ranging from 4 months to 5 minutes amongst the patients.

Average consultation time was recorded to be 16.9 minutes amongst the Internet user group and 15.7 minutes amongst the Internet-non-user group with a statistically significant time difference of 0.8 minutes. The maximum consultation time amongst both the groups was 30 minutes with the minimum time being 5 minutes.

## **Discussion**

Our patient survey revealed that there is equal number of Internet user and Internet non-user patients visiting our outpatient consultation. This raises an interesting fact about the importance of the need for the present day clinician to keep updated about not only the recent advances in the field but also with the IT skills. Literature has suggested prior Internet awareness amongst patients have resulted in explicitly patient controlled outcomes during consultation (10). Our patient survey did not focus on this aspect. Statistically significant was the increased consultation time of 0.8 minutes among the Internet user group

in comparison to the Internet non-user group is still debatable. But does this point to the possible change in the consultation models in the Internet age is still questionable. Poor IT skills among the clinicians may result in defensively asserting an authoritative “expert opinion” when encountered with the Internet user group of patients as studies do suggest (10).

## **Conclusion**

Though the internet has revolutionized the world with access and availability of information, health texts needs more regulation as it does seem to start having an impact on the consultation times as seen in our patient survey. Is this the beginning of a change for the physician-patient relationship model in the Internet age?

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