



## Consulting the Internet before visit to general practice. Patients' use of the Internet and other sources of health information

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# Consulting the Internet before visit to general practice

## *Patients' use of the Internet and other sources of health information*

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**Objectives** – To describe where patients in Danish general practice get information about health and disease, particularly how patients prepare for a visit to their GP, with special reference to use of the Internet.

**Design** – Structured interviews.

**Setting** – Four Danish general practices.

**Patients** – 93 consecutive patients after visiting their GP.

**Main outcome measures** – The patient's report about use of the Internet and different mass media in preparation for the consultation.

**Results** – Only two patients never looked for health information. Of all patients, 20% had used the Internet to get health information, 8% because of the current visit, i.e. a third of all with Internet access had used it because of the current visit. Women used the sources of

information more than men did. Personal contact with family, friends or neighbours was the most commonly used source.

**Conclusion** – The Internet is used in direct preparation for a visit to the general practitioner. The vast majority of patients use the mass media for information. In general practice, the main source of information on a health-related subject is personal contact with family and friends.

**Key words:** Internet, mass media, patient information, general practice, consultation.

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Detailed knowledge about health and disease is no longer the privilege of the medical profession. These subjects have for years been debated in the news media and today the information is even more readily available through the Internet. In the Danish media, the coverage of medical items has increased in the period 1985 to 1995: the number of articles has gone up by more than 50% in the major Danish daily newspapers and by 180% in some of the major weekly magazines (1).

A growing number of Danish families have Internet access – in the spring of 1999, about one in three (2). The health information web site [www.netdoktor.dk](http://www.netdoktor.dk) aims at the general public and went online in the summer of 1998. It had around 400 000 hits per month in January 2000 from about 129 000 different users (3).

We tried to find studies on how the patient seeks health information as part of his/her preparation for the visit to the general practitioner (GP), especially the extent to which it comes from the Internet. We searched MEDLINE, CINAHL, PsycINFO and the Cochrane database using search terms related to patient education, patient information-seeking, patient education methods and Internet utilisation, and used results from a major ongoing search of the literature on patients' intentions and expectations of the consultation (4). Many studies and a number of reviews

cover the content and quality of health-related web-sites and use of the Internet by patients (5–7). No references were found concerning preparation for the visit.

We therefore decided to do a study to describe where patients in Danish general practice seek information about health and disease, especially in preparation for a visit to their GP.

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

One of the authors (SB) interviewed 93 patients during 2 weeks in January 2000 in the waiting rooms of 4 Danish general practices with a total of 10 doctors; a structured interview guide listing medical information sources was used. One practice is rural, the other three in metropolitan Copenhagen. Danish-speaking patients  $\geq 16$  years of age were interviewed from Tuesday in the first week until Thursday of the second.

For each source, we first asked if the patient had ever used it, and for those who had, how often they usually consulted it and whether they had used it in preparation for the consultation of the day.

The structured interview was piloted in eight patients. At the patients' suggestion, family and friends were included in the interview guide because they were considered as an important source of informa-

tion. The interviews took place right after the patient had seen the doctor. When one interview was completed, the next patient to come out of the doctor's office was asked to participate. No attempt was made to select particular patients and no type of patient was excluded. The interviewer spent 11 half days in the practices.

## RESULTS

Ninety-three patients were interviewed. A few patients (less than 10) refused to participate apparently from lack of time. Of the 93 patients, 59 (62%) were women and 34 (38%) men. Age varied from 16 to 90 years (mean 40). The visit was the first for the current complaint in 42% of the patients.

The majority of patients get health information from the news media (Table I). Two said they never looked for health information. The women used all sources except patient organisations more than the men did, and they tended to read magazines and doctors' columns more. Men preferred newspapers and a popular Danish television programme "The Doctor's Desk". Almost all patients sought the advice of family, friends or neighbours, and for the current complaint 81% had used this source. Only one patient had not used either the news media or personal contacts. Eight patients had used the news media but not family or friends.

### *Use of the Internet*

Of all 93 patients, 45 were Internet users and 80% of these had access at home. The age of Internet users

varied from 17 to 51 years (mean 31). Of all patients, 19 (20%) had used the Internet at least once to get health information. The Internet had been used by 8% of all because of the current visit. This means that 37% of those who had ever been on the Internet had been there because of the current problem. Of the eight patients who had been on the Internet because of the visit, two came with a new problem. One patient brought a printout from a website. Half the patients who had used the Internet for medical information had done so at least once a month.

Patients gave several reasons for getting health information from the news media. Many mentioned general interest, curiosity, entertainment, disease in the family, or in connection with their job. Only a few said that they did it to check the doctor, get a second opinion, avoid bothering the doctor, get an explanation of symptoms or to be relieved of worries about their health. Table I indicates how often the different news media were used.

## DISCUSSION

Although almost all patients get medical information from the news media, the main source of information in preparation for a visit is other people. In this study it was left to the patients to define what was meant by information about health and disease. This varies from advice on diets and weight control on a weekly basis to specific information on special medical problems in a patient leaflet. It has not been our purpose to discuss the quality of the information or patients' opinions about it.

Table I. Which sources of information do you use?

	Ever used the source					Used in preparation for today		Using source at least monthly
	% of all* (n = 93)	Females (n = 59)		Males (n = 34)		% of ever users	% of all (n = 93)	% of all (n = 93)
		%	rank	%	rank			
Talked with family member, friend or other person	92 (86–98)	95	1	85	1	90	81	na
Weekly magazines	80 (72–88)	93	2	56	5	25	19	51
Brochures, leaflets	74 (65–83)	80	4	65	4	30	22	na
Danish TV programme "The Doctor's Desk"	72 (63–81)	75	5	68	2	11	8	49
Daily newspaper	70 (61–79)	71	6	68	2	25	18	43
Read doctor's column	63 (53–73)	81	3	32	6	20	11	na
Books	30 (21–39)	45	7	6	10	50	15	na
Danish radio programme about health	24 (15–33)	27	8	18	7	15	4	17
Internet	20 (12–28)	22	9	18	7	40	8	10
Patients association	15 (08–22)	14	10	18	7	20	3	na
Sent question to doctor's column	2 (0–5)	3	11	0	11		1	na

\*95% confidence interval in parentheses.

na = not asked.

The small proportion of patients using patient interest groups reflects the primary care population. If patients with for example diabetes were asked, a considerably larger proportion would be expected.

The number of patients in the study who reported having Internet access at the time of the interview, 39%, corresponds well with the 33% found in a public survey in Denmark earlier in the same year (2). By the way the questions were phrased, the results describe where the patients actively seek information. It does not include the information that patients may get from other sources, e.g. warnings on cigarette packages, billboard campaigns, etc. The patients receive this information passively, in contrast to the information actively sought by a patient. There is of course no sharp distinction, as news media and the Internet also contain advertising.

The patients were included irrespective of age, gender, education or job. By approaching patients from general practice, we have a varied group that is typical of patients seeing a Danish GP. No attempt was made to obtain a random sample, and we know nothing about the few patients who declined to participate.

The patients' use of the Internet and other sources of information may render them better informed, but it also overloads them with irrelevant and disturbing information. In both cases this constitutes a challenge to the GP, who has to take the patients' new level of knowledge into account during the consultation process.

Use of the Internet and the news media may create an insecurity among patients and therefore in itself change the way patients use the healthcare system (7,8). This should lead to projects investigating the effect of the information available and to developing it in ways that suit the patients' needs and that are desirable for the healthcare system.

## CONCLUSION

The Internet is used not only as a general source of information but also in direct preparation for a visit to the GP. For patients in general practice, the main source of information on health-related subjects is personal contact with family and friends, but the vast majority of patients also use the news media and the Internet.

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