

Developing Cyberseals of Approval

Save to myBoK

by Gwen Hughes, RHIA

According to a recent study by marketing technology company Cyber Dialogue, consumer demand for healthcare content has reached an estimated 36.7 million adults. The study projects that by 2005, 88.5 million adults will use the Internet to find health information, shop for health products, and communicate with providers and third-party payers.

There's an abundance of good information on the Web, but plenty of hype and dangerous advice as well. Unlike traditional publications, no one has to approve information before it is published on the Internet. Web searches can yield accurate information designed to educate and inform, as well as inaccurate information meant to persuade or sell a product. How can consumers tell the difference?

There are several ways to determine whether an article or source is credible. Credible work includes the author's name, education, training, experience, and contact information, such as the author's e-mail address. Whether the article is published on a known and respected association or organization's Web site, identification of the sources of information cited in the article and a publication process that includes peer or quality review are all additional indicators of credibility.

It is also important that health information is current. Unlike classic novels, health information is quickly outdated. It is important, then, to know the date the piece was last written or updated.

Not only should information be credible and timely, it should be comprehensive, reasonable, and objective. Such information will appear well rounded and will include all relevant facts, qualifications, consequences, and alternatives. It will reference the sources of information used and offer balanced and reasoned arguments that are moderate in tone.

An additional indicator of credibility may be adherence to a set of e-health standards. Such Web sites may display a seal or verbiage indicating the standards to which they adhere. Organizations that administer e-health standards, accreditation, or cyberseal programs include:

- **HiEthics or Health Internet Ethics (www.hiethics.com)** is a coalition of US-based consumer health Internet sites and information providers. Its seal program is intended to certify that a health Web site is in compliance with its 14 principles
- **Health on the Net Foundation (HON) (www.hon.org)** is a not-for-profit portal to medical and health-related information on the Internet. Based in Switzerland, HON promotes responsible self-regulation by health information providers on the Internet
- **The Internet Healthcare Coalition (www.ihealthcoalition.com)** is a Washington, DC-based non-profit organization whose goal is quality Internet health resources and information. In October 1999, the group launched its "E-health Ethics Initiative" to provide a forum for the development of a universal set of ethical principles for health-related Web sites. As part of its effort, it will collaborate with HiEthics and HON to ensure a system of e-health codes that is understandable to the public and uses a common terminology. As a first step, the committee will develop a common glossary of definitions and terms for verification and compliance efforts so that e-health consumers can easily compare security and privacy statements and therefore make more informed decisions about Internet health sites. The three organizations will continue to work together to update and improve their individual codes and compliance efforts
- **The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) (www.ahima.org)** published three overarching principles and 39 operational tenets aimed at protecting the privacy and ensuring the quality of personal health information on the net. The tenets are applicable to healthcare providers, third-party, and consumer-maintained sites. Find them at www.ahima.org/infocenter/guidelines/tenets.html
- **The American Medical Association (AMA) (<http://jama.ama-assn.org/>)** developed principles to guide development and posting of Web site content, govern acquisition and posting of online advertising and sponsorship,

ensure site visitors' and patients' rights to privacy and confidentiality, and provide an effective and secure means of e-commerce

- **The American Accreditation HealthCare Commission (URAC) (www.urac.org)** is in the process of developing an accreditation seal that would be granted to health Web sites that meet certain privacy and reliability standards

In addition to the programs outlined above, other Web site standards and cyberseal programs exist that don't address e-health specifically as well as proprietary cyberseal programs offered by for-profit organizations.

References

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