

Careers

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Nicola Davies explains how to check the validity of online information

A SAFER PATH ON THE NET

Typing the word 'health' into an internet search engine gives billions of results.

Although some information is undoubtedly valuable, health professionals cannot take its veracity or quality for granted.

A 2010 article in the Archives of Disease in Childhood (titled Googling Children's Health: Reliability of Medical Advice on the Internet) found that 60 per cent of online health information is incorrect.

So how can nurses filter the useful and relevant information from inaccurate and, in some cases, dangerous information?

There are quality assurance marks to look for (see box). The Information Standard mark, which should only be placed on websites committed to supplying reliable health information, is an indicator. The Department of Health created the symbol as an assurance that the information is accurate, evidence-based, unbiased and accessible. Websites bearing this symbol are inspected regularly.

The Health on the Net Foundation, an independent organisation supported by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, provides its



own stamp of approval for websites that follow safeguards on confidentiality and privacy.

Internet searches will also generate web links to organisations selling health and medical products or services and information. Nurses should check they carry the United Kingdom Accreditation Service symbol, showing that they meet strict criteria and an international standard.

Some charities and similar organisations have earned a reputation for credible information provision. These include Cancer Research UK, Macmillan Cancer Support and the British Heart Foundation.

It is best not to rely on information from one website. Instead, compare information for consistency as well as for contrasting professional views. A good indication of a website's credibility is its referencing of

peer-reviewed journals and whether it links to other reliable sources of information. Most websites also include an 'About us' section that gives details about its owners and organisations affiliated it.

Be cautious

It is prudent to be sceptical of information that favours just one treatment. Be wary of miracle cures or solutions to problems – if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Information should be current and health-related websites should always include publishing dates and details of last revision.

Finding accurate and good quality health information takes time and patience and once found should be checked and used cautiously **NS**

Nicola Davies is a health psychologist and writer

Quality assurance marks



United Kingdom Accreditation Service



Health On The Net Foundation



The Information Standard