

Letter to the Editor

Accuracy of online health information about controlling childhood fever during the H1N1 influenza pandemic

Dear Editor

The internet is a major source of health information for patients. However, health information online is unregulated and so can be unreliable and inaccurate.^{1,2} Currently there is no standardised method of establishing the accuracy of material published on a website nor is there any requirement for information to be validated before it is published.

We investigated the evidence published to date assessing the accuracy of online information concerning the treatment of childhood fever. Treatment of childhood fever is particularly pertinent given the recent H1N1 influenza outbreak, a pandemic which has heavily affected children and which causes high fever. The NHS direct website and the dedicated flu site were overwhelmed with visitors at the peak of the media coverage surrounding the outbreak.³ It is likely that parents visiting these sites will also have visited other less authoritative sites in an attempt to access information on how to treat their children.

A literature search carried out using the Medline and PsycINFO databases and appropriate medical subject heading (MeSH) terms yielded only three articles investigating the accuracy of online information on how to treat childhood fever. All three studies agreed that the consequences of accessing inaccurate information can be serious, yet found that many sites provide partially or wholly inaccurate information.^{4–6} Many websites identified in these studies did not adhere to published guidelines on the treatment of paediatric fever and several provided incorrect information – for example, the sustained use of paracetamol at an inappropriate dosage. The studies found that much of the information provided about how to treat fever in children varied greatly from site to site, which may cause confusion for parents.

One of the studies⁴ identified three useful indicators of the accuracy of material available on a website:

- Displaying the HONcode logo.
- Having an organisational domain (e.g. org, nhs, gov).
- Displaying a copyright (although this was shown to be the least useful indicator).

The HONcode logo is displayed on sites that voluntarily agree to abide by the Health on the Net foundation's code of conduct for publishing high-quality health information on the internet.⁷ However, many reputable sites, such as sites managed by the UK NHS, are not registered with HONcode, despite containing accurate information. Conversely, being registered with HONcode does not necessarily mean that a site is completely accurate, rather that the site has adhered to a set of principles which provide a proxy for quality and accuracy.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of the healthcare professional to modify or monitor all of the information available online concerning childhood fever, caution must be taken when recommending the use of the internet for information, and patients should be advised to use the websites of government organisations, for example NHS Direct, or to look for sites showing a HONcode logo.

The most recent study in our review was carried out in 2003, yet patients are still being exposed to inaccurate online information over six years later. As H1N1 influenza will continue to affect children over the coming months the demand for information is not likely to cease and practitioners will need to consider where to direct their patients for useful information.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Reliable sources of information on childhood fever

NHS www.nhs.uk/Planners/birthtofive/Pages/Childhoodillnesses.aspx

Patient UK (displays HONcode logo) [www.patient.co.uk/health/Fever-\(High-Temperature\)-in-Children.htm](http://www.patient.co.uk/health/Fever-(High-Temperature)-in-Children.htm)

International example:

Medline Plus www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003090.htm

HONcode

The Health on the Net Foundation provides a downloadable toolbar which will tell you whether the site you are visiting displays the HONcode logo
www.hon.ch/HONcode/Patients/Visitor/visitor.html

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