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# DUTCH RHEUMATOLOGISTS AND ONCOLOGISTS ARE POSITIVE ABOUT HEALTH-RELATED INTERNET USE BY THEIR PATIENTS

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**Background:** An increasing number of patients are using the Internet to search for health-related information.

**Objectives:** To explore the experiences and attitudes of rheumatologists and oncologists with regard to health-related Internet use by their patients. In addition, we explored how often physicians referred their patients to health-related Internet sites.

**Methods:** We sent a questionnaire to all Dutch rheumatologists and oncologists. The questionnaire included questions on demographics, experiences with health-related Internet use by patients, referral behavior and attitudes about consequences of health-related Internet use by patients for patients themselves, the physician-patient relationship and health care. The response rate was 46% (N=238). Of these respondents 134 were in practice as a rheumatologist and 104 were in practice as an oncologist.

**Results:** Almost all physicians encountered that patients raised information from the Internet during a consultation. However, physicians were not confronted with health-related Internet use by their patients on a daily basis. Physicians had a moderately positive attitude towards the consequences of health-related Internet use. The physicians indicated that patients are often better informed about their illness (54%) and often better informed about treatment options (51%) as a result of Internet use. According to the physicians, a negative consequence of health-related Internet use was that patients are more often unnecessarily concerned. Physicians felt that health-related Internet use by patients could sometimes (48%) or often (30%) lead to patients being more capable in participating in the decision making process concerning their treatment. Although 43% of physicians indicated that health related Internet use did almost never or usually not lead to better treatment decisions, many physicians (41%) indicated that sometimes health-related Internet use can lead to better treatment decisions. Most of the physicians indicated that health-related Internet use is usually not (46%) or almost never (23%) undermining the physicians' authority. The physicians indicated that unnecessary diagnostics and unnecessary treatments were often not provided as a result of Internet use by patients. Physicians indicated that the duration of a medical consultation sometimes (39%) or often (36%) increases because of health-related Internet use by patients. Oncologists were significantly less positive about the consequences of health-related Internet use for the physician-patient relationship and the health-care than rheumatologists.

Most of the physicians have never (32%) or only sometimes (42%) referred a patient to a health-related Internet site. Most physicians (53%) found it hard to stay up to date about reliable Internet sites for patients.

**Conclusion:** Physicians are moderately positive about health-related Internet use of their patients, but they only seldom refer their patients to health-related Internet sites. Possibly, offering an up-to-date list with accredited websites for patients would be of help for and stimulate physicians to refer their patients.

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