

Qualitative study of online discussion forums about acne.

In this issue of the *BJD*, Santer *et al.*¹ report on a study where they conducted an inductive thematic analysis of online posts collected from open access UK forums, in which users discussed the use of oral antibiotics for acne. Qualitative researchers are increasingly making use of online forums, which provide a searchable resource that can be used by people for advice and information, with the potential to impact both positively and negatively on people's health behaviours.² Santer *et al.* selected four types of forums, including a general forum, an acne specific forum, a medical forum and a parenting focused forum, so as to include a range of diverse perspectives. The final data corpus included 65 discussions from 294 participants, resulting in 136 pages of data.

The themes identified by Santer *et al.* provide a fascinating insight concerning perceptions about oral antibiotics for acne, and the kind of advice that was sought and offered on the internet forums. Santer *et al.* found the quality of the advice that was offered was highly variable, and suggested that the users might find the experience of online advice rather bewildering. The threads included a diverse range of views concerning the efficacy of oral antibiotics for acne. Some advice was helpful, but other advice was unhelpful (such as advising forum users to see a dermatologist for mild symptoms). At times there was an intriguing dyadic quality to the data extracts, where the 'threads' of online conversation were reported in the results, and perhaps future research could explore this further.

Santer *et al.* were unable to access demographic information about the users who posted their views online, because this information was not reported. Importantly, information concerning the gender, age, and nationality of the people posting or replying to the posts was not available, nor was information concerning the severity or noticeability of the acne. These factors are very important in the lived experiences of acne.^{3,4} It seems likely that a diverse range of people would be using the internet forums, since acne is a common condition, affecting many teenagers and also persisting into adulthood.⁵ It was not clear whether the forum users were writing on their own behalf, or seeking advice for, or about, another person. However, by adopting a maximum variation strategy in the sampling⁶ it is likely that the themes that emerged are of particular interest and value in capturing the experiences of these internet forum users. This innovative and thought-provoking paper will be of interest to a wide range of readers, including health professionals, dermatologists, clinicians, people with acne and their families, and qualitative researchers interested in using online data.

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