

Implications on Informed Consent of Information Available to Patients on the Internet Regarding Hip and Knee Osteoarthritis

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Abstract : Hip and knee arthritis are two of the commonest conditions that result in elective orthopaedic outpatient referral. At clinic appointments advice given regarding lifestyle modifications or treatment options may not be fully understood by patients. The majority of patients now use the internet to research their condition and use this to inform their decision about treatments. This study assessed the quality of patient information regarding hip and knee arthritis. To assess the quality of patient information regarding knee and hip arthritis available on the internet. Two internet searches were carried out one month apart using the search terms "knee arthritis" and "hip arthritis" on Google, a search engine that accounts for over 90% of internet searches in the UK. Sites were evaluated using the DISCERN instrument, a validated tool for measuring the quality of consumer health information. The first 50 results for each search were analysed by two different observers and discrepancies in scores were reviewed by both observers together and a score was agreed upon. In total 200 search result websites were assessed, of which 84 fulfilled the inclusion criteria. 53% (n=44) were funded directly by commercial healthcare businesses and of these, 70% (n=31) were funded by a surgeon/hospital promoting end-user purchase of surgical intervention. Overall 35% (n=29) websites were "for-profit" information websites where funding was from advertising revenues from pharmaceutical and prosthesis companies. 81% (n=67) offered information about surgical treatments however only 43% (n=36) mentioned the risk of complications of surgery. 67% (n=56) did not have any reference to sources for the information they detailed and 57% (n=47) had no apparent date for the production of the information they offered. Overall 17% (n=14) of websites were judged as being of high quality, with 29% (n=24) being of moderate quality and 54% (n=45) being of low quality. The quality of health information regarding hip and knee arthritis on the internet is highly variable and the majority of websites assessed were of poor quality. A preponderance of websites were funded by a commercial surgical service offering athroplasty at consumer cost, with a further third being funded indirectly via advertising revenues from commercial businesses. The vast majority of websites only mentioned surgery as a treatment and nearly half of all websites did not mention the risks or complications of surgical intervention at all. This has implications for the consent process. As such, Clinicians should be aware of the heterogeneous nature of patient information on the internet and be prepared to advise their patients about good quality websites where further reliable information can be sought.

Keywords : hip osteoarthritis, informed consent, knee osteoarthritis, patient information

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