

Website watch

www.nhs.uk/choices

The stated aim of this website is to put patients at the centre of their treatment and it was developed to help people make choices about their health. It ranges from lifestyle advice about such topics as smoking, drinking alcohol and exercise to the practical aspects of finding and using National Health Service (NHS) facilities. The site gives straightforward information in words, pictures, video and audio to help people have more control over their health and well-being. It states that it draws together the knowledge and expertise of NHS UK, the National Library for Health, NHS Direct, the Information Centre for Health and Social Care, the Health Commission, and other health and social care organizations.

The website is divided into three sections, all easily accessed from the home page. The first section is entitled 'Live Well', and gives guidance, tips and information on a healthier lifestyle. The information is presented in downloadable magazines that are divided into age- and gender-specific sections of the public from teenagers to pensioners. For instance, the pages relating to 18–39-year-old females feature a video about postnatal depression featuring a personal account of one woman's experience of this condition and an article on bacterial vaginosis. By putting in some personal details and your postcode, you can run a health check that will assess your body mass index and general health, and give you geographical statistics regarding what you are most likely to suffer from by living in your area.

There are articles on obesity, weight loss, recipes, snoring, giving up smoking, sexually transmitted diseases and much more, all with links to appropriate help and useful websites. A quick flick through showed a good selection of relevant advice for each age and sex. I thought that this section was a bit basic, but it is well presented and attractive to read, and even if it is rather obvious, it could provide a wake-up call for many people who are perhaps rather complacent about their health and habits.

The second section is a 'Health A–Z'. This features male and female body maps – although both figures have a most peculiar shifted posture

that, if presented by a patient, would immediately lead you to diagnose a back problem! However, by clicking on an area of the body, a glossary of health topics, conditions and procedures appears by way of explanation. It is also possible to click on the alphabet and select a topic that you may wish to research under the appropriate letter. There are multimedia guides for each topic under separate sections such as: 'What is it?', 'What happens?', 'Lifestyle' and 'Useful links'. This is a well presented and useful section that is accessible to those with little medical knowledge.

The third section is 'Find Services'. This area is designed to help you and your general practitioner (GP) pick a provider. There is also guidance about finding the best provider for the procedure required. Using your postcode, each hospital in your area is scored, and facts and figures are given for NHS hospitals, foundation trusts and treatment centres, as well as independent hospitals. Your route to hospital, as well as parking and public transport information, can be researched, and by putting in the reference number that you have been given, it is possible to access 'Choose and Book' in order to book online. For each hospital, there are star ratings for quality of service, infection control, cleanliness, respect given by staff and information given to you. It is also possible to give your thoughts about the service, and after your submission has been scrutinized by the moderators, this comment may be published on the website. I looked at a few different hospitals and noticed that all comments were favourable! Again, I felt that this was a useful section of a generally good website with useful, clear and well-presented information for the public.

www.positivelywomen.org.uk

Positively Women was set up in 1987 by a group of women living with HIV who felt that there was a pressing need for services specific to the needs of women with this virus. At that time, there was no effective support: most of these women had been infected by injected drug use and, therefore, suffered from a multitude of other problems. This website started life as a

support group, but was launched as a charity in 1992 and has become a key provider of HIV services. The mission of the charity is to provide specific, effective support for women living with HIV, enabling them to make informed choices, and also to challenge stigma and discrimination. I was shocked, as I am sure many others were, when I saw Stephen Fry's recent television programme on HIV. It was obvious from his interviews with women that they are still very stigmatized and persecuted in our society when they are HIV positive. It seems that there is far more discrimination against women with HIV than there is against men.

The long-term goals of the charity are to help to create a society where the diagnosis of HIV-positive (HIV+) is not aggravated by huge stigma and discrimination, to influence the UK Government's commitment to HIV and sexual health policies, and to work with the Department of Health in service development, informing them about the needs of women living with HIV and challenging shortfalls in policy decisions.

The services that the charity offers are one-to-one assistance from support workers, all of whom are HIV+ themselves, all across the UK. Positively Women also facilitate support groups and workshops, give immigration support and advice, and provide children and family support. They have set up a drugs and prison project, mainly for women in Holloway prison, for those with HIV who are experiencing problems with drug and alcohol dependence, as well as possible co-infection with hepatitis B and C.

The work that the charity performs is mainly London-based, but they are setting up a national project. Positively Women have a North London resource centre where they offer complementary therapies such as acupuncture, homeopathy and

art psychotherapy, develop community involvement, and provide training for healthcare providers. They also have a free quarterly magazine for women registered as HIV+. When someone registers with the charity, it seeks permission from the woman to contact her hospital clinic, or GP in order to have her diagnosis confirmed before she is able to join, so giving members privacy and security.

The website is informative about the services Positively Women seeks to provide and may be a useful reference for us to have available in practice.

Finally, there are a couple of useful website references that I thought readers might appreciate having:

www.helptheaged.org.uk

This has a great deal of useful information about services for the elderly, but it also has a very good downloadable leaflet entitled *Bladder and Bowel Weakness – Managing Incontinence*. This gives good simple advice and explanations for elderly people, and would be useful for a carer as well.

www.ibsnetwork.org.uk

This provides information, support and advice for people with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). The IBS Network runs a helpline and an e-mail forum for members, has a journal, and supplies 'Can't Wait' cards. They also have downloadable leaflets on the website for sufferers. I find that many patients who are referred with irritable bladders also have irritable bowels, and this website has been a useful resource for them.

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