

## A guide to good practice for using health websites

### Introduction

The popularity of the Internet has made it easier and faster to find health information. Much of this knowledge is valuable, of course, but the medium also facilitates the rapid dissemination of misleading material. Therefore, it is important for people to carefully consider the quality and reputation of their source of information, and where appropriate, to discuss their findings with their healthcare provider. This article should help you to make good use of Internet searches for professional purposes.

### Health on the Net Foundation

The 'Website watch' column, which used to appear in print in *JACPWH*, is now published in the journal section of the Association's website. Issue 107 (Autumn 2010) featured an article explaining the Health on the Net Foundation Code of Conduct (HONcode). Because so much information is now to be found online, the reader may find it useful to be steered towards quality assurance, especially those individuals who are perhaps unsure about performing Internet searches.

A website can be awarded certification by the Foundation if it complies with the HONcode. The certification seal (Fig. 1) can then appear on the webpage and is valid for one year. Re-evaluation is also required after any complaint. The Foundation promotes and guides the deployment of useful and reliable online health information, and its appropriate and efficient use. Created in 1995, it is a non-profit, non-governmental organization, accredited by the



**Figure 1.** Health on the Net Foundation Code of Conduct certification for medical and health websites.

Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

In order to cope with the unprecedented volume of healthcare data that is now available on the Internet, the HONcode offers a multi-stakeholder consensus on standards to protect citizens from misleading health information. The tenets of the HONcode are stated as:

- authoritativeness;
- complementarity;
- privacy;
- attribution;
- justifiability;
- transparency;
- financial disclosure; and
- sponsorship.

The website ([www.hon.ch/](http://www.hon.ch/)) can be accessed in French, English, German, Spanish, Chinese or Polish, and the content will vary according to whether you choose to access it as a patient/individual, a medical professional or a web publisher. It provides four services: HONcode certification; 'HONsearch', a search engine that accesses reliable and trustworthy medical websites; 'HONtools', resources for improving websites; and 'HONtopics', a multifaceted source of news, facts and multimedia items. The HONcode seal of approval may offer reassurance to your patients when they access online information and it provides them with an effective search tool for websites. Participation is voluntary throughout the world, but sites displaying the Foundation's symbol are generally considered to be credible sources of knowledge.

Unfortunately, only a small number of websites participate in the scheme. Therefore, wisdom and discernment continue to be expedient when judging information found on the Internet.

Happily, there are numerous online resources that enable the public and healthcare providers to assess websites on the basis of credibility, respectability and dependability. Tips and strategies to employ in making your own judgement about Internet information can be found at many reputable locations, which are often run by governmental departments, charities or academic institutions [e.g. the Medical Library Association (MLA); see below].

Some good examples include:

- 'Evaluating Health Information on the Internet' (NCI 2010); and
- the Online Library Learning Center (USG 2010).

Tutorials for the very keen are available at websites such as:

- Infopeople ([www.infopeople.org/resources/select.html](http://www.infopeople.org/resources/select.html));
- the University of British Columbia Library ([www.library.ubc.ca/home/evaluating](http://www.library.ubc.ca/home/evaluating)); and
- the Virtual Training Suite ([www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective](http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective)), whose Internet Detective discusses 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly'.

## Medical Library Association

Founded in 1898, the MLA is a non-profit educational organization consisting of more than 1100 institutions and 3600 individual members in the health sciences information field. The Association is committed to educating health information professionals, supporting research in this area, promoting access to the world's health sciences knowledge and working to ensure that the best health information is available to all. In recognition of the danger and frustrations of inaccurate data retrieval on the Internet, the MLA has compiled a user's guide to finding and evaluating health information on the Web (MLA 2010a). This includes ideas for filtering search results when using popular search engines such as Google or Yahoo. It also offers a top ten list of reputable websites (MLA 2010b). Readers are directed to reliable tools such as MedlinePlus and Healthfinder.

## MedlinePlus

MedlinePlus ([www.medlineplus.gov/](http://www.medlineplus.gov/)) is a consumer-oriented website that was established

by the National Library of Medicine, the world's largest biomedical library and creator of the Medline database. An alphabetical list of health topics contains more than 300 specific diseases, conditions and health issues. Each page has links to authoritative information on that subject and a preformulated Medline search that provides journal article citations on the subject.

## Healthfinder

Healthfinder ([www.healthfinder.gov/](http://www.healthfinder.gov/)) is a gateway consumer health information website. Its stated goal is 'to improve consumer access to selected health information from government agencies, their many partner organizations, and other reliable sources that serve the public interest' (MLA 2010a). This gateway also provides links to online journals and medical dictionaries. The developers and sponsors of this site include the US Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion and the US Department of Health and Human Services.

**Karen Radford**  
*Websites Editor*

## References

- Medical Library Association (MLA) (2010a) *A User's Guide to Finding and Evaluating Health Information on the Web*. [WWW document.] URL <http://www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html>
- Medical Library Association (MLA) (2010b) *For Health Consumers: 'Top Ten' Most Useful Websites*. [WWW document.] URL <http://www.mlanet.org/resources/medspeak/topten.html>
- National Cancer Institute (NCI) (2010) *Evaluating Health Information on the Internet*. [WWW document.] URL <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/information/internet>
- University System of Georgia (USG) (2010) *Online Library Learning Center*. [WWW document.] URL <http://www.usg.edu/galileo/skills/>