Quality evaluation criteria of health information resources on the internet

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become a nearly essential tool to find health information for consumers, researchers, professionals as well as health managers. This is all due to the big amount of resources and information, which are available on the net. The Press Release WHO/72 had already counted about 10,000 health websites in 2000. Nevertheless, along with this exponential growth of internet resources and information, there has also been a lack of control, which makes things difficult for users to choose the most appropriate and accurate information according to their needs.

Finding and choosing accurate high-quality information for the user has been a general concern. This has made different initiatives to come up, both from private and state institutions, with the aim of establishing some guidelines to be used as indicators for the assessment and creation of high-quality health information on the internet.

Our research study is a review of all these initiatives, which have created indicators for the assessment, organisation and identification of high-quality information on the internet.

METHODS

A review of the main proposals for quality assessment of internet health resources has been carried out. After doing done a search in PubMed (Medline), Lisa and Dois databases, and in Google, several published studies on the same topic have been found and their different quality evaluation tools have been assessed.

This section is not aimed at creating a comprehensive list of all current initiatives, since there is a really wide range of them. The chosen initiatives are both those which were included as a reference in most of the looked-up bibliography and those which are an external link to websites of similar centres. All these initiatives have been grouped together according to their final aim: codes of conduct, tool-based evaluation, and assessment and accreditation systems.

RESULTS

The initiatives which are used in order to organise and identify high-quality information on the Internet can be divided into three groups:

CONCLUSIONS

All these existing initiatives are not systematically implemented to health websites, not even when they are created or in their subsequent assessment. So, we should:

- establish a consensus at a health level in order to develop some general guidelines, rules and good-practice habits, which would lead to a coherent, homogeneous website development, with a single tool to define health website quality, and

- make health websites follow some minimal, essential quality criteria, as a result of an international consensus for resource assessment.

If health websites have high-quality contents, their users, professionals and health managers as well as patients will be faithful to these information sources. Users have the final say on the resource. Information managers, who build up website contents and shapes, must be aware of this reality and they should focus on ensuring excellent information, service and design.

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