

Finding reliable health information online

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Lots of health care information is available on the internet, but it can be hard to know what is current and medically correct. Recent surveys have shown that up to 59% of Europeans use the internet as a resource for health and wellness-related information.



Knowing which sites and what information to trust can be a minefield, but one Swiss-based website, the Health on the Net Foundation, has been offering a dedicated website, which aims to protect citizens from false or misleading health and ethical information for 12 years now.

The Health On the Net Foundation (HON) is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation, accredited to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, set up by participants of the Use of the Internet and World-Wide Web for Telematics in Healthcare conference in 1995. Its aim was to create a centralised, legitimate way for people to find accurate health information.

Launched in 1996, the website has fast grown to become one of most respected not-for-profit portals to medical information on the internet, working closely with industry organisations.

Most recently, it has launched a Code of Conduct accreditation scheme to help standardise the reliability of medical and health information available on the web. Last December, the French National Authority for Health chose the online health information accreditation body to be the official certifying body of all [French health websites](#).

HON executive director, Celia Boyer, told E-Health Europe: "The aim of our website is simple. We want to protect and guide citizens in their usage of the internet regarding healthcare. We are all aware of the nature of the web and the dangers inherent in this, and we wanted to find a way to try to ensure citizens are reading material which is accurate and helpful."

To gain accreditation with, and have their medical articles published on HON, websites must meet strict standards laid down by the European Union and the United Nations health boards.

Boyer said: "We have a dedicated team here in Geneva which checks every health website which applies to work with us and we go through them thoroughly to ensure that an average patient would be able to make reasonable decisions about what health information they will trust, or what products or services they will use.

"Individuals need to know what standards a site employs in developing content. Health-related websites must make clear the sources which they have used and ensure that the information presented is appropriate, independent and timely. Health-related websites should also identify who is most likely to visit the site and ensure that the information presented is as comprehensible and as easily accessible as possible to all visitors including disabled persons."

The HON network is one of the few to have achieved UN Worldwide online Reliable Advices to Patients and Individuals (WRAPIN) status, and currently has 5700 accredited sites working with them from 72 countries.

These can be searched for using HONselect, HON's search integrator for strictly medical and health queries. It combines five information types - MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) terms, authoritative scientific articles, healthcare news, websites and multimedia into the one service.

Boyer said: "The HONcode enables the identification of sites of quality and confidence, thus contributing towards the general improvement of trustworthy information and websites, as well as helping the user in his search for health information."

One of HON's latest developments has been the introduction of a toolbar which tells consumers if a site is accredited or not. The HON Code logo will illuminate if the site is one of its members with the word accredited displayed in large bright font. The logo remains dimmed out if the site is not a member body.

Key to its success, HON has received recognition from across the globe, which Boyer is particularly proud of.

In May 2004, HON won the eEurope Award for eHealth presented by the European Union and the EU Commission.

Judges said it was given the award for its services for the citizen including its accreditation system for websites and a search engine/directory of trustworthy information sources.

Boyer said: "We were honoured to receive this award, especially as we had such stiff competition from over 100 submissions for the award. The award emphasises the recognition from bodies across the world for our online information quality, addressing the fundamental issue of standards for the presentation of health information."

Boyer is justifiably proud of HON's success. The website is now averaging 27,000 hits a day and works closely with Google.com to ensure that member sites show up under the Refine results category when key medical terms are searched for.

Offering results in English, French, German, Spanish and Chinese, the website continues to expand its global reach and Boyer says there is still more to come.

"Our mission is to guide the growing community of healthcare consumers and providers on the world wide web to sound, reliable medical information and expertise. In this way, HON seeks to contribute to better, more accessible and cost-effective health care.

"Quality assessment has been our concern since the beginning. We recognise the need for systematic and stringent peer review. We have led international efforts to improve the quality of medical information on the Internet, notably through the HON Code of Conduct (HONcode) for healthcare site developers and this will remain a HON priority, which our dedicated team and councils will continue to work on across the globe."