



Can You Trust Health Information on the Internet?

Findings from Health Improvement Institute's one day workshop on
Quality of health information on the Internet

Bethesda, MD (December 16, 1997): People are increasingly turning to the Internet to search for health information. Can they rely on what they find? Not always, according to experts who took part in a one-day workshop on enabling consumers to tell health fact from fraud. With over 10,000 health-related web sites, the Internet can be fertile ground for charlatans.

"The Internet can be a useful source of health information" noted Dr. Peter Goldschmidt, president and founder of the Health Improvement Institute that presented the workshop. "But, consumers can be deceived by slick displays, and find it hard to tell authoritative information from self-promoted cure-alls."

Workshop participants called for:

- codes of conduct for producers to include full disclosure so consumers can better judge the usefulness and reliability of health information
- a way of sending compliments or complaints about an Internet site to a neutral party and viewing that party's compilation of consumers' experiences about the site
- educating the public to become discriminating consumers of health information, and to get them to support the development of tools for this purpose
- encouraging watchdogs to monitor health-related sites and to make their ratings - and how they were compiled - available on the Internet.

At the workshop's conclusion, Dr. Goldschmidt said, "The Internet holds far too much promise to improve people's health to burden it with unworkable regulations or restrictions. The goal has to be voluntary action by producers, independent rating agencies, and other public and private organizations to provide consumers with the means to judge for themselves what information is valuable to them, and what is best ignored. The results of this workshop represent an important beginning."

Enabling consumers to evaluate the quality of health information on the Internet would help people to save time and money, avoid potential harms, promote self-care, and generally improve their health. In the meantime, they should remember on the Internet, as elsewhere, that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is too good to be true.

Over 60 health care, Internet, consumer, government, telecommunications, and public health organizations were represented by the experts and interested professionals who attended the one-day workshop in Bethesda, Maryland, on November 17, 1997. HII presented the one-day workshop with the support of the US Pharmacopeial Convention, Medical Care Management Corporation, US Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, and American Association of Working People, and with the assistance of the Consumer Coalition for Quality Health Care, US Food and Drug Administration, and World Health Organization.

To obtain a hardcopy of the report, please send a check for \$5.00 payable to "Health Improvement Institute", to cover printing, packing and postage. For more information, please contact Health Improvement Institute.

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