Empowering Patients for Self-Care through Internet Use

Lorraine Steefel & Rosario P. Estrada

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Correspondence to:
lsteefel@gmail.com

Lorraine Steefel, DNP, RN, CTN-A, Adjunct Asst. Professor
Rosario P. Estrada, DNP, RN, BC, CPN, Assistant Professor

University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, School of Nursing, Newark, NJ

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Abstract

Introduction: The Institute of Medicine’s Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century (2001) underscored the crucial need for the effective use of technology to empower patients thereby improving their outcomes. Use of the Internet to gather health information has the potential to foster greater patient engagement in health maintenance and care; however, there are requirements to its use that nurses must be aware of and alert patients to as they assist them in using the Internet as an effective self-care management tool.

Objective: The objective of this position paper is to discuss patient empowerment and self-care management through effective, nurse-assisted use of the Internet.

Approach/Strategy: With an awareness of Internet caveats, for example, poor health literacy; failure to check the quality of e-information and its sources; and misinformation, nurses must use strategies to assist patients to appropriately use the Internet for shared decision-making as partners with their health professionals. These strategies include assessment of patients’ literacy skills and the subsequent direction to Internet sites appropriate to each patient; assistance with Internet access; guidance regarding the evaluation of website credibility, with emphasis on using content that discusses evidence-based research and treatment; and encouragement of patients to integrate and plan their new found e-information as an augmentation to patient-provider interaction rather than a substitute for this interaction.

Conclusion: As patients become active in the e-information-seeking journey, they are challenged to access and assess the quality of information as well as to understand information tailored to their healthcare needs. Nurses play a vital role in encouraging and assisting patients to become well versed in using e-information for self-care management.

Keywords: self-care management, patient empowerment, health literacy, Internet use for patient teaching
Introduction

In 2001, the Institute of Medicine’s Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century described an expensive, outdated healthcare system that hosts worsening chronic conditions, and underscored the crucial need for the effective use of technology to empower patients and improve their health status. Patient empowerment has been linked to Information Technology, embodied in the ‘meaningful use’ mandate by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS) calling for better and more accurate healthcare information, easy access, as well as the empowerment of patients to take a more active role in their health and those of their families (HealthIT, 2012). Given the skyrocketing cost of healthcare, fewer health providers, and increased number of patients with chronic illnesses (Forkner-Dunn, 2003), nurses must empower patients for self-care management and encourage the engagement of shared decision-making with health professionals as partners in promoting tailored and personalized self-management tools and Internet resources (Healthy People, 2012). This article discusses patient empowerment and self-care management through the use of the Internet, highlights its outcomes, and cautions nurses regarding caveats to Internet use.

Empowerment and Self-care Management

Empowerment is a paradigm shift of power in which healthcare providers release their authoritative role and patients assume a high degree of involvement and control in actively managing their own health care (Brenan & Safran, 2005). To empower people means to enable them to do something. For patients, empowerment is the autonomous involvement in their healthcare decision-making process (Schulz & Nakamoto, 2011). Patients need to know, be able to, and want to act on their knowledge to manage their health.

In addition to education, empowerment should include practical training, motivational factors, and tools and techniques for self-management, since “empowerment will work only if patients are able to integrate their increased responsibilities into their everyday lives” (Chatzimarkakis, 2010, p. 1571). Rather than just following medical advice, self-management is the person’s ability to manage the symptoms and consequences of living with a chronic condition, including treatment, physical, social, and lifestyle changes (Barlow, Wright, Sheasby, Turner, & Hainsworth, 2002).

According to the Institute of Medicine (2003), self-management support is the systematic provision of education and supportive interventions by healthcare staff to increase patients’ skills and confidence in managing their health problems, including regular assessment of progress and problems, goal setting, and problem solving support. Internet portals and personal health records (PHRs) have proliferated, which empower patients to control and manage their own health (Cowan, 2010). Some HIPAA compliant patient portals such as RelayHealth and Microsoft Vault have provided free, easy access to search, share, and communicate health information. Here, the doctor-patient relationship has the potential to become the “Patient-Doctor Partnership” (Cowan, 2010, p. 280). As an increasing number of people are turning to the Internet for health information and support, with an estimated 51% of adults aged 18-64 looking up information in 2009 (CDC, 2010), health providers must explore and take advantage of Internet use to empower patients and improve patient self-care management (Forkner-Dunn, 2003).

Use and Outcomes of the Internet

When patients log on to the Internet, they can conveniently search for timely health information and find a site that overcomes isolation, reduces stigma of an illness, and increases their control of an intervention (Griffiths, Lindenmeyer, Powell, Lowe, & Thorogood, 2006). After reading health information, considered the most common use of the Internet for health issues, people log on to decide whether to see a healthcare provider and to prepare for and follow-up on appointments, or to choose a provider (Andreassen et al., 2007).
Accessing the Internet impacts health and how patients care for themselves. For example, a systematic review of Internet-based self-management interventions for youth between the ages of 6 to 19 with health concerns, reported evidence for improvement in symptoms or disease control in obesity, recurrent pain, encopresis, and particularly for asthma (Stinson, Wilson, Gill, Yamada, & Holt, 2012). Furthermore, as part of a diabetes management program, patients with type 2 diabetes were empowered to self-monitor their blood glucose, with encouraging effective results and consequently reducing their health care cost (Tunis & Minshall, 2008); while a computer-assisted diabetes self-management education program was found to motivate participants to enhance their self-management skills and accomplish their healthcare goals (Chau et al., 2012).

Many health information sites have community discussion boards where individuals can join in. Through their online exchanging of information, encountering of emotional support, sharing of experiences, helping others, and finding recognition and amusement, participants are empowered and report outcomes such as being better informed; feeling confident with their physician, their treatment, and their social environment; improved acceptance of the disease; increased optimism and control; and enhanced self-esteem and social well-being (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008). Via the Internet, patients with arthritis who used online workshops as a resource when they were unable or unwilling to attend an arthritis self-management program showed significant improvement in four or six health status measures and self-efficacy (Lorig, Ritter, Laurent, & Plant, 2008).

Data collected in a study of men with prostate cancer revealed that accessing information and support online can have a profound effect on men’s experiences of prostate cancer, and provided a method of taking some control over their disease, while limiting inhibitions they experienced in face-to-face encounters with their healthcare providers (Broom, 2005). According to Song, West, Lundy, and Dahmen (2010), pregnant women seeking health information via the Internet found the means to confirm normalcy and take control of their reproductive experiences.

In their meta-analysis of the effectiveness of Web-based versus non-Web-based interventions, Wantland, Portillo, Holzemer, Slaughter, and McGhee (2004) found evidence to support the effectiveness of Web-based interventions compared to non-Web-based interventions at improving behavioral change outcomes such as increased exercise time, increased knowledge of nutritional status, increased knowledge of asthma treatments, increased participation in health care, slower health decline, improved body shape perception, and maintenance of weight loss at 18 months.

Caveats to Internet Use

Although online information-gathering has the potential to foster greater patient engagement in health maintenance and care (Iverson, Howard, & Penney, 2008), nurses must be aware of caveats as they encourage patients to log on for information that will help them better understand and manage their conditions. First of all, patients must possess sufficient health literacy. This includes the ability to access appropriate health-related sites, obtain and use the information they find on the Internet to make appropriate healthcare decisions, as well as relate this information to their particular needs and experiences (Schulz, & Nakamoto, 2011). Nurses must be aware that certain groups such as older Americans and minorities, especially those for whom English is not their primary language and those who have less than a high school education, are more likely to have limited literacy skills and lack resources. These are factors that result in a “digital divide” (of those who can and cannot access the Internet) and in disparities in health care (Kutner, 2006). After assessing patients according to their literacy skills and bearing in mind their potential limitations, nurses should assist them with accessing appropriate websites. Or, nurses should be able to direct those who have no Internet access to suitable locations, such as public libraries or educational institutions that offer free Internet services to members of their local community.

If the quality of e-health information obtained is poor or inappropriate, this can lead to negative con-
sequences. For instance, the provider-patient relationship might suffer with one or both parties having misperceptions about assessment, treatment and management. As a result, the patient’s condition might deteriorate further (Shmerling, 2011). According to the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project (Fox, 2006), 85 million Americans gathered health advice online, not being aware of how reliable, valid and appropriate the information they found. Therefore, nurses must encourage patients to check the source and date of the health information they find online and evaluate the credibility of websites; the most reliable coming from government and educational institutions that reflect evidence-based practice (Golterman and Banasiak, 2011). Encouraging patients to visit and use websites that provide research and evidence-related information that is pertinent to their specific conditions and medical regimen can reveal to patients a whole array of treatment options that are most current and appropriate. Patients can use this information when discussing care options with their healthcare providers, rather than making these decisions alone (Schulz & Nakamoto, 2011).

Misuse of information may produce negative results, leading patients to ineffective therapies, life-threatening situations, and increased in healthcare costs (Eysenbach & Diepgen, 2001). Nurses must discuss with patients how to integrate the e-health information that patients find, such as the pros and cons of their treatment within the context of their health care (Eysenbach & Diepgen, 2001). Nurses must caution patients that health information materials, decision aids, and self-management action plans obtained from the Internet should only be used to supplement their understanding of their medical condition, and should not take the place of the more important interactions and health information exchange between them and their healthcare providers (Coulter & Elkins, 2007).

**Conclusion**

Knowledge is power. The lack of knowledge leads to poor health, poor adherence to medical regimen, and the inability of patients to exercise control over managing their disease or chronic illness. Online information-gathering has the potential to foster greater patient engagement in health maintenance and care. However, finding health information on the Internet can result in confusion for patients who have found so much that they need to distinguish the medical “truth” as it relates to them (Hungerford, 2009). As patients become actively involved in information-seeking, they are challenged to access and examine the quality of information, and use this to suit their respective health information needs (Alpay, Verhoeef, Xie, Te, & Zwetsloot-Schonk, 2009). For patients to be empowered and become partners in managing their own care, they must be provided the necessary tools and skills to effectively participate in health decision-making and self-management. As patient advocates, nurses must heed the caveats to Internet use, alert patients to these requirements, and assist them as they work together to search for and use evidence-based health information relevant to self-care management.

**References**


