

Use of the Internet by oncology patients: its effect on the doctor-patient relationship

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TO THE EDITOR: The possible impact of the Internet revolution has been much discussed.¹⁻³ In two surveys, conducted in 1999 and 2001, we surveyed oncology patients from two teaching hospitals in central Sydney to explore the experience and impact of Internet use among Australian oncology patients.

In November 1999, a questionnaire was mailed to 240 eligible patients selected from 617 sequential registrations to the oncology units. Eligible patients were those who were alive, competent, had cancer, were of known address and whose attending medical officer was participating.

In the second survey, to obtain a more representative sample, we invited all oncology patients visiting the outpatient clinics over a three-month period (September to December 2001) to participate.

We received completed questionnaires from 142 patients (response rate, 59%) in 1999 and from 153 patients (number of refusals unknown) in 2001. Of these, 33% (47/142) in 1999 and 46% (70/153) in 2001 had accessed the Internet for information relating to their illness, either personally or through family and friends. In both surveys, most users accessed the Internet from home, the information sought was mainly in relation to treatment, and the

most-visited Internet sites were those of cancer centres.

Patient perceptions of the impact of Internet-acquired information on their experience of cancer are summarised in the Box. Most patients viewed its impact as positive. The advantages of using the Internet reported by patients included its speed, convenience, privacy, currency, diversity of viewpoints, and usefulness as a support tool. Many reported that they had sought corroboration of Internet information with information from other sources, especially their doctor. Problems identified with the Internet were its impersonal nature, time costs, overabundance of information, and concerns about the discovery of inappropriate, inaccurate or distressing information. Most respondents emphasised that they were able to recognise these limitations, but, notwithstanding, considered the Internet a valuable resource. For example, one respondent wrote: "I felt my capacity to cope with the illness and treatment greatly improved because I learned enough from the Internet to challenge my oncologist and thereby learn to trust him and his advice."

Despite concerns expressed by many doctors, these oncology patients assessed impacts as either positive or neutral in overall influence. Increasing Internet use by patients and their families should not be viewed as a problem, but as an opportunity for patients and their treatment teams to work together, ensuring that patients have up-to-date information about their illness and its treatment and are aware that they are not alone in the fight against cancer.

1. Van Der Weyden MB, Armstrong RM, Chew M. The communication revolution: winners and losers [editorial]. *Med J Aust* 1999; 171: 512.
2. Coiera E. The Internet's challenge to health care provision [editorial]. *BMJ* 1996; 312: 3-4.
3. Ferguson T. From patients to end users [editorial]. *BMJ* 2002; 324: 555-556. □

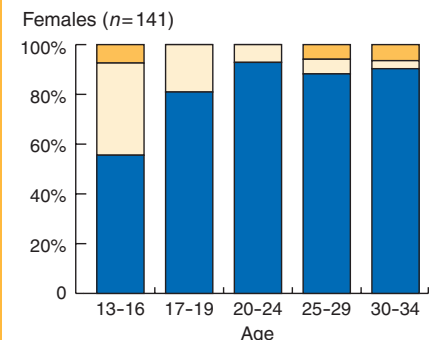
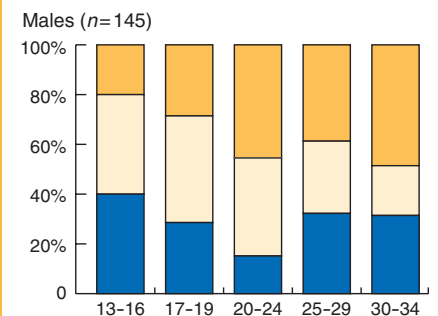
Rising cannabis use in Indigenous communities

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TO THE EDITOR: We write to alert policy makers and clinicians to the challenge presented by rising cannabis use in north-east Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory, given that many current cannabis users were previously petrol sniffers. In the past five years, there has been a rise in cannabis use and evidence of expansion of supply links in the Miwatj region.¹ There are concerns that rising cannabis use is associated with social effects: increased family violence, drug-alcohol psychosis, self-harm and suicide, and community disruption. Policy makers seeking to foster

Current cannabis users among people aged 13-34 years in northeast Arnhem Land



Legend:
■ Cannabis users with a history of petrol sniffing
■ Cannabis users with no petrol sniffing history
■ Never used cannabis

Results for samples from two remote communities in the Miwatj region, assessed by using health worker consensus classification, self-report data, and supporting data from health clinic chart review.

Perceived influence of Internet-acquired information among oncology patients in 1999 and 2001

	Better	No change	Worse	Question not answered
1999 survey (n = 47)				
Relationship with doctor	12 (26%)	30 (64%)	0	5 (11%)
Discussions with doctor	20 (43%)	22 (47%)	0	5 (11%)
Treatment decisions	22 (47%)	19 (40%)	1 (2%)	5 (11%)
Coping with illness	26 (55%)	15 (32%)	1 (2%)	5 (11%)
2001 survey (n = 70)				
Relationship with doctor	24 (34%)	34 (49%)	2 (3%)	10 (14%)
Discussions with doctor	42 (60%)	18 (26%)	1 (1%)	9 (13%)
Treatment decisions	37 (53%)	25 (36%)	0	8 (11%)
Coping with illness	32 (46%)	31 (44%)	1 (1%)	6 (9%)