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MEDIA RELEASE

DR GOOGLE CAN HELP PATIENTS TALK TO THEIR DOCTORS

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MOST patients who search their symptoms online before presenting to an emergency department have improved interactions with their treating doctor, and their internet search does not adversely affect their compliance with prescribed treatments, according to research published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

A 51-item purpose-designed survey was administered to 400 adult patients who presented to emergency departments at St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne and Austin Health between 1 February and 31 May 2017. A total of 196 (49.0%) indicated that they regularly used the internet for health-related information; 139 (34.8%) reported searching for information on the problem for which they had presented to the ED.

Searching had a net positive effect for 150 searchers (77.3%); a net negative effect was reported by 32 searchers (16%), while no effect was reported by 14 participants (7%). A total of 132 of 195 participants (68.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that searching helped them communicate more effectively with health providers; 155 respondents (79.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that searching helped them better understand their health provider during the consultation; 155 (80.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that searching allowed them to ask more informed questions. However, 76 respondents (40%) agreed or strongly agreed that gathering information from the internet made them worried or anxious.

A total of 153 respondents (78.9%) indicated that internet-derived health information never or rarely led them to doubt their diagnosis or treatment; 174 (91.1%) had never or rarely changed a treatment plan advised by a doctor because of online health information.

"Searching for online health information had a positive impact on the doctor-patient relationship, particularly for patients with greater e-health literacy, and was unlikely to cause patients to doubt the diagnosis by a practitioner or to affect adherence to treatment," Dr Anthony Cocco, a medical intern at St Vincent's Melbourne, and his co-authors wrote.

"We therefore suggest that doctors acknowledge and be prepared to discuss with adult ED patients their online searches for health information."

Please remember to credit *The MJA*.

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