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GPC

General Practitioners
Committee

Searching the Internet for medical information - tips for patients

BMA 

By Dr Paul Cundy, chairman of the GPC's IM&T subcommittee

1. Always seek a balanced view. Never rely on the information from just one site.
2. Only trust that which you can independently verify. Check that any documents or research can be also found in a journal or library. Anyone can publish anything on the Internet; its far more difficult to get something published in a scientific journal.
3. All authors should be identified and their credentials and qualifications listed. Also look to see if they have other published works.
4. Also look for references in the documents to other credited material. Scientific papers will also list their reference papers.
5. Look for evidence that the site is regularly reviewed and that information is regularly updated. The date the information was published should be made obvious.
6. Check for spelling! I've seen a site from close to Siberia that purported to specialise in "un-continece"!
7. Look for any advertising or links to commercial organisations. Who is backing the website? Would this cause a conflict of interest or introduce bias? Is it a charity? All sites need backing, however, who's funding it might influence the opinions expressed.
8. Look for balance of opinion in the site over a range of issues. Sites that offer opinionated views on a single theme or subject are likely to be "single issue mavericks".
9. Be wary of anything that criticises or disparages anyone or anything.
10. Look for evidence of an editorial board, these tend to engender a variety of views.
11. How complex is the site? Big sites need to be carefully managed, the smaller the site the less likely it is to be backed by a substantial organisation.
12. Avoid any "on line consultations or diagnosis". Consultation whether on the phone or face to face is a dynamic exchange of information where the doctor is seeking out information from the patient by way of open or guiding questions and the patient seeks feedback or advice from the doctor. So called "E-mail or online consultations" are little more than electronic memos or questionnaires and never approach the requirements of a consultation.
13. What are the sites stated approaches to privacy and confidentiality?
14. Just as in the high street, be wary of anyone claiming miracle cures.
15. Contact addresses, as well as e-mail contact addresses, are a sign of an organisation's existence in bricks and mortar.