Chapter 61
Cyber Behaviors of Self Health Care Management

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ABSTRACT

The use of social computing technologies for health information and support has been of growing interest among researchers. Eight in ten computer connected individuals browse the Internet for health information, which makes it one of the most common online activities (Tanis, 2008). The Internet technology has produced a revolutionary change in the availability and the amount of health and medical information to patients. Sometimes referred to as the informaticization of medicine, a whole new field of knowledge around medical information and communication in cyber space emerged in the late 1990s. As the technologies for health management develop, it becomes more important to explore the health management behavior of computer-connected patients. This entry aims to serve this purpose by discussing the background and current state of knowledge about how usage of the Internet technology affects individuals' self health care management behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Information is important at all stages of our health from prevention of diseases to health promotion, but never more than when we are diagnosed with a serious chronic health problem (e.g., cancer) and when there is a need for self health-care management on a daily basis. The Internet has produced a revolutionary change in the availability and the amount of information available to patients. Cyber patients surf the virtual library of health and medical information to equip themselves with competencies as they navigate themselves through medical system. As Eysenbach (2000) pointed out "the increasing availability of interactive information that is accessible to consumers, most notably

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0315-8.ch061

through the Internet and related technologies such as digital TV and web television, coincides with the desires of most consumers to assume more responsibility for their health" (p. 1714).

It is estimated that more people (approximately six million) consult health information resources on the Internet on any given day than making office visits to health professionals (Nettleton, Burrows, & O'Malley, 2005; Elkin, 2008). Aging Americans are also becoming the largest demographic group that go online to find information in issues related to their health. It is reported that seventy percent of computer-connected older adults use the Internet for health purposes (McMillan, Avery & Macias, 2009). This reflects a major shift in how patients manage their health, which is also reflected in the redefinition of patients as health care consumers (Kivits, 2009).

This synergy between technology and medicine is leading to profound changes in self health-care management. Self-health care management in cyberspace is defined as use of information and communication technologies, mostly the Internet, to gather health and medical information in order to remain, improve and/or regain personal health (Goldner, 2006; Kivits, 2006). The objective is to be an informed partner in managing health care with professionals and assume a proactive role in achieving health and wellness (Beaudoin & Tao, 2007; Kahana & Kahana, 2003). Participation in online patient networks is also an active display of self-health care management, and enables participants to achieve some control of the health issue though informational, decisional, emotional support others who are coping with the same health condition (Broom, 2005; Barker, 2008; Cotten & Gupta, 2004; Drenta & Moren-Cross, 2005).

This entry discusses the background and current state of knowledge about how usage of the Internet technology affects individuals' self health care management behavior. The entry will first present an overview of the earlier work of scholars who established the foundation for a growing area of research in health related social computing in late 1990s. These scholars are: *Robert Gann* (Plymouth University, UK), *David H. Gustafson* (University of Wisconsin-Madison), *Michael Hardey* (University of Hull, UK), *Kevin Wright* (University of Oklahoma). The entry then discusses the health care management behaviors of cyber patients in three subsections: (1) cyber empowerment in e-patient networks (2) digitally connected cyber seniors and (3) concerns around cyber health care management, including implications for medical encounters and online information quality. Some of the current leading scholars whose work made significant contributions to the study of cyber patients' health care management behavior since the turn of the century are *Jöelle Kivits* (University of Leicester, UK), *Kristine K. Barker* (Oregon State University), *Patricia Drentea* (University of Alabama), *Christopher Beaudoin* (Tulane University), *Melinda Goldner* (Union College, New York), *Shelia R. Cotton* (University of Alabama), *Victoria Pitts* (City University of New York), *Sheryl Perreault LaCoursiere* (University of Connecticut), and *Sanjay K. Pandey* (Rutgers University). The entry will conclude with future research directions and suggestions for further reading.

OVERVIEW OF THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

Gann (1986) wrote that medical science and technology had reached a critical point where improvements in health can only be achieved when people have full access to health and medical information. He suggested that consumer health informatics can play a major role in achieving this goal. Williams and Calnan (1996) found that using computer- based technology significantly increased the confidence of patients to cope with their illnesses They even contended that computer technology could be used as a type of efficacy or re-skilling intervention and suggested that 'prescribing' the use of the computer-mediated