Using Online Social Networks for Increasing Health Literacy on Oral Health

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ABSTRACT

A descriptive study was conducted among the members of Oral Health group on a social media network (Facebook) through the Internet. The objective of this study was to explore online interactions on oral health among the Internet users. The study was divided into two parts. First part included content analysis of Oral Health group interactions during the period of July 2011 to April 2012 and second part included online survey findings. All the postings and their discussions in “Oral Health” group were collected and analyzed by using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Total 427 group members were included, 65.84% members were recruited by administrator (admin) and 34.16% by other members of Oral Health group. Among the group members 110 (23%) members were actively participating in group interactions. A total 384 interactive messages were exchanged between the members on 194 discrete topics were discussed (in average 2 messages exchanged per topic). The flow of group interactions mostly occurred between dental professional to dental professional 78%, followed by general to general 3%, dental professional to general 9%, general to dental professional 10%. Opinion of survey respondents about the oral health group online interactions were found as appreciative (52%), “modern technology of learning is useful” (34%), “improves clinical knowledge of professionals” (26%), “improves oral hygiene knowledge and practice” (22%), and “helps to solve oral health problems” (38%). Online oral health group appears to be an effective platform for sharing information, experiences and advice on oral health among the Internet users.

Keywords: Health Communications, Health Literacy, Internet-Based Discussion Group, Online Social Media, Oral Health

DOI: 10.4018/ijudh.2013040106
INTRODUCTION

An internet-based discussion group was formed by dental and public health professionals. Its purpose was to facilitate discussion and exchange of ideas and information on oral health between dental professionals and others to assess its usefulness as an educational tool, platform for discussion and medium for exchange of ideas on oral health. Oral health is fundamental to general health and well-being. In general, poor oral health has a negative impact on quality of life, influencing eating abilities, personal confidence, mental health, social interaction, personal relationships, general health and well-being and enjoyment in life. Proper dental hygiene can prevent gum disease or digestive disorders and results give a bright healthy smile. On the other hand, neglected oral health can increase the risk of serious health conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes. In other words, a healthy mouth helps create a healthy body, so taking care of teeth and gums is a must. Adequate knowledge about oral health is considered to be an essential prerequisite for health-related behavior (Ashley, 1996). Also, studies have shown that there is an association between increased knowledge and better oral health (Hamilton, 1991; WoodGrove, 1987). It has been demonstrated that health education intervention can effectively change knowledge and practice regarding oral health.

Today, millions of people use the internet on a regular basis. So, naturally, much of this activity has been focused on health. Online health tools have the potential to help people manage their health and health care, but little is known about the use of different kinds of eHealth tools across the population (Baur & Kanaan, 2006; Lorenceet et al, 2006). In 2003, an estimated 12.5 million online health-related searches were conducted globally each day. However, aggregate figures do not tell us about what people are actually doing when they interact with online health-related content and tools.

By sharing knowledge on oral hygiene, one can help improve the overall oral health of a community. In this era of globalization, the internet is the best option for dissemination of knowledge on oral health so that a large number of people can benefit from it. The rapid growth of social networking that has been observed over the last two to three years is indicative of its entry into mainstream culture and its integration into the daily lives of many people. Hence, this study on online interaction on oral health is a step forward towards smooth and quick dissemination of knowledge on oral health.

METHODOLOGY

This was a descriptive study including a retrospective review of qualitative and quantitative data obtained from the posts on the discussion forum along with a survey involving the participants. All the posts and related discussions between 1st July 2011 and 30th April 2012 in “Oral Health” Facebook groupwall were collected manually and the interactions were studied and analyzed by using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Further an online anonymous survey was conducted (using SurveyMonkey) using a semi-structured questionnaire regarding oral health among the group members during March, 2012. The web link of Survey monkey questionnaire form was posted to Facebook oral health group wall and members were requested to respond. For Quantitative method, data were analyzed with SPSS version-15. The textual interactions in the group were subjected to content analysis. The flows of interactions were categorized as between general people to general people, general people to dental professionals, dental professionals to dental professionals, dental professionals to general people. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institute Review Board of Bangladesh Institute of Health Sciences (BIHS). The participants were administered informed consent for volun-
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