

Chapter 15

Use of the Internet by Medical Practitioners in Private Hospitals in Warri, Delta State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of the Internet by medical practitioners in private hospitals in Warri Delta State, Nigeria. Descriptive survey design was adopted and questionnaire was the instrument used to collect data. The total population and sample for the study were 137 medical practitioners from 30 private hospitals in Warri. Findings revealed that most medical practitioners used the Internet on a regular basis; a majority of the medical practitioners started using the Internet between 1 – 5 years ago; most of the medical practitioners spend 2 – 5 hours using the Internet per visit; a majority of medical practitioners used the Internet without assistance. Medline, journals and PubMed were the Internet resources used by most of the medical practitioners. Internet use enables the respondents to improve patient care, keep up-to-date; high cost of Internet access and lack of access to the Internet were some of the problems facing most of medical practitioners. The study recommends that hospital management should provide their medical practitioners with Internet facilities to enable them access to the most recent and accurate information for effective service delivery. The findings will help health care authorities especially in developing countries to improve on Internet access facilities to medical practitioners.

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet is currently transforming many aspects of life, especially in the ways people are accessing health information. Networked computers now allow health professionals to connect among themselves as well as patients around the world, providing access to medical information that until recently was reserved for academicians and professionals only, and making it possible for lay people to gain extensive insights into their own health. The Internet and the World Wide Web allow anyone with access to a computer the opportunity to be a researcher, to scan and look through literally millions of sources of information (Bass, 2003).

Health care is a complex and information-intensive process in which data that concern the health and medical conditions of individual patients are stored and used for clinical care and management. Also, data are aggregated for secondary purposes, such as the management of local health services, the monitoring and surveillance of diseases, and for planning the delivery of health services at local, regional, national and international levels. Within health care organizations, services and systems, large volumes of data are collected, stored, analysed, transferred, and accessed on a daily basis. Data on individual patients, up-to-date information on how to prevent, diagnose, treat and manage diseases from research is being published and is required by medical practitioners to provide effective and safe care for patients and the public (Bath, 2008). This medical data and information are increasingly being made available on the Internet for the use of medical practitioners, patients and the public.

Information is essential for health and development, but the world's scientific knowledge remains largely out of reach for many countries. This is due, in no small part, to financial, technological, and infrastructure challenges. In recent years the role of information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet, has been central

to efforts to remedy the situation. The effective use of these new technologies can enhance the flow of scientific knowledge and contribute to the improvement of the conduct and sharing of health research, the formulation of sound health policy, and the advancement of health services (Dzenowagis, Kuruvilla, & Aronson, 2002). The effective use of the Internet can enable medical practitioners to receive health information and advance the health of patients.

A medical practitioner also known as physician, doctor of medicine, or medical doctor is a person who practices medicine, and is concerned with maintaining or restoring human health through the study, diagnosis, and treatment of disease and injury; which he/she accomplishes through a detailed knowledge of anatomy, physiology, diseases and treatment — the science of medicine — and its applied practice — the art or craft of medicine. Many medical practitioners specialise in one or other of the branches of medicine such as gynecology (women's health), psychiatry (mental health), pediatrics (children's health) etc. Training in these specialised areas takes about four years, after which an examination is written to qualify as a specialist (SA Study, 2011)

Several studies have been conducted on the use of Internet by medical practitioners. It has been observed in a study that medical practitioners use the Internet to look for diagnostic and treatment information online (Bazzoli, 2000). Koller, Grütter, Peltenburg, Fischer, and Steurer (2001) found in a study of use of Internet by medical doctors in Switzerland that Internet was available to a majority of the respondents, that the main reasons for using the Internet during consultations were retrieval of information on drugs, patient-specific information, vaccination recommendations and advice to persons travelling to foreign countries, and computation of the risk of atherosclerotic disease, while the reasons for not using the Net among some of them were inappropriate time demands, possible interference with the physician-patient relationship, lack of

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