

Integrating e-health into clinical practice: evaluating the needs of a prostate brachytherapy population.

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Purpose: E-health, defined as almost any electronic exchange of health-related data, is changing the way health care is delivered. We used a web-based survey to evaluate a prostate brachytherapy website to assess patient satisfaction and future direction for development.

Methods and Materials: www.brachy4u.ca was started in 02/01 to provide web-based information to newly diagnosed prostate cancer patients, to those contemplating brachytherapy, and to those having been treated by brachytherapy. Over the years it has expanded beyond basic brachytherapy information to include clinical trial information, patient education videos, newsletters, a forum on erectile dysfunction, and has been translated into 3 languages. Furthermore PSA blood test results are available on-line and patients can submit International Prostate Symptom Score questionnaires, prior to or in lieu of a visit. Brachy4U has received up to 589,000 hits monthly from around the world.

A web-based IRB approved survey was distributed through the mailing list to patients registered with the website, and in addition was distributed through the local Man to Man Support Group mailing list.

Results: 151 responses were obtained to the survey, 38% from the patient population and the remainder from the Man to Man Group. Seventy-six % of respondents had post secondary education, 87% accessed the Internet from home and 79% rated themselves as intermediate or expert users. Two-thirds of respondents accessed Brachy4U, usually around the time of their clinic visit and 52% were extremely or very satisfied with the website services. The most commonly used website features were to obtain PSA results on line (61%), to access the Brachytherapy overview page (47%), to access links for health information (40%), and to access the F.A.Q. page (36%). The most commonly requested additional services were access to scheduling tools to book appointments with their doctor (53%) and prescription renewal access (38%). Only 13% wanted to have a videoconference with their doctor added to the Brachy4u site. Not surprisingly, 88% of patients would still prefer to discuss their therapy options in person.

Ninety-eight percent of our population knows how to send and receive email but 62% have not sent emails to their health care professional. Eighty-three percent would be interested in communicating with their health care professionals using email and websites in the future, the majority having little concern for privacy issues (46% not at all concerned). Despite the fact that 36% of respondents travel 10-50 kilometers and 28% travel > 50 km for a clinic visit, 64% were not willing to pay out of pocket for e-communication with their health care professional in lieu of a follow-up clinic visit

Conclusions: Access to information online is having a positive impact on the surveyed population of men who have been diagnosed with prostate cancer. In addition to benefiting from a non-interactive information source, the majority of men surveyed would like use the internet to communicate with their health care provider, book clinic appointments, check lab results and refill prescriptions. Security issues are not a concern for the majority.