



Effective use of the internet in psychiatry

By Louise Theodosiou



What is the internet?

The internet is an electronic network of computers that includes nearly every university, government, and research facility in the world. Countless commercial companies now have websites, and individuals can easily set up their own sites. Legislation for the internet is an evolving process, implementation of which is challenged by the speed with which sites can be created and removed from the internet.

What can psychiatrists gain from consulting the internet?

- Up-to-date medical information.
- Useful downloads to give to patients or materials to use in presentations.
- Links to other professionals through website discussion forums.
- Educational materials.

What can patients gain from the internet?

- The internet can provide a way of obtaining information in private.
- In spite of the best efforts of doctors, they can sometimes provide information which is confusing. The internet can help to provide answers.
- Websites provided by organisations can provide accounts of life with a particular illness or disorder and provide support groups.
- Increasingly, patients and families are using email as a means of communication with healthcare workers.

The internet offers a wealth of information about psychiatric disorders but unfortunately not all of it is reliable. Regulatory bodies, psychiatrists and mental health professionals all have a role in safeguarding content.

The quality of information for psychiatric disorders.

Psychiatric disorder	Findings
Depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a need for better evidence-based information about depression. ▪ The quality of Cognitive-behavioural therapy and self-help tools has been controversial. ▪ Online information about depression could help reduce stigma.
Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A review of the literature does not reveal any relevant papers published on the quality of internet information on anxiety disorders. ▪ One study suggested that internet-based CBT may be of benefit in addressing the core symptom of panic.
Dementia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research suggests that there is a wide range in the quality of websites available. ▪ Internet support groups for people affected by Alzheimer's disease were seen as a valuable method of support for family members.
Suicide and deliberate self-harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The internet is an important source of information on strategies to avoid suicide and self-harm. It also provides information on ways to kill oneself (cybersuicide). ▪ The phenomenon of suicide pacts between people who meet on the net is now emerging (Rajagopal, 2004).
Schizophrenia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A review of the literature concluded that the quality of information was poor. ▪ Haker <i>et al</i> (2005) looked at internet-based self-help forums for sufferers of schizophrenia. They found that there were relatively few such sites, but that they did appear to be of help.
Hyperkinetic disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A review of the literature concluded that the quality of information was poor.
Autistic-spectrum disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One study found internet chat rooms had a role in promoting the use of secretin. ▪ Email groups generated by parents of children with autism offered helpful support and information to other parents.

Other issues



Apart from issues about the quality of information found on the internet, psychiatrists should be aware of the ethical dilemmas surrounding internet and email usage e.g. the potential confidentiality implications of using email in clinical conversations.

The General Medical Council advises that email can be used in communication but 'there is always some risk that information will be disclosed inadvertently'. Therefore:

- take professional advice (and document it) before connecting to the internet
- take steps to ensure that information is transmitted and received securely
- be aware of the fact that email can be intercepted
- anonymise or encrypt data where that is practicable
- consider using another medium.

Useful websites

- www.alzheimers.org.uk (The Alzheimer's Society)
- www.bma.org.uk (British Medical Association)
- www.bmj.com/bmjournals.htm (*British Medical Journal*)
- www.discern.org.uk (Discern)
- www.dh.gov.uk (Department of Health – point of access for white papers)
- www.doctors.net.uk (Doctors Net – offers a link to the National Library of Medicine as well a forum space that doctors can use to pose questions to one another)
- www.drugs.gov.uk (The Home Office website on the misuse of drugs – a useful source of information on legislation, research and guidance)
- www.gmc-uk.org (General Medical Council)
- jama.ama-assn.org - (Journal of the American Medical Association)
- www.medic8.com - A UK medical search engine
- www.nas.org.uk (The National Autistic Society)
- www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov (The National Centre for Biotechnology Information)
- www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi (The National Library of Medicine – contains over 15 million Medline citations)
- www.nice.org.uk (National Institute of Clinical Excellence)
- www.nshn.co.uk (National Self Harm Network)
- www.sign.ac.uk (Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network)