ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Perceptions of Medical and Dental Doctors on Dealing with 'Google Informed Patients'

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore the perceptions of the health professionals regarding internet health-seeking behaviour of patients and problems faced by recent medical and dental graduates.

Methods: Eight General physicians and six dental surgeons from different regions of Sialkot and seven recent medical and dental graduates were selected via purposive sampling technique. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews over the phone with prior appointments. Manual qualitative thematic analysis was performed by transcribing the interviews and then codes, subthemes, and themes were generated.

Results: Six themes and sixteen subthemes were identified depicting the perceptions of physician and problems faced by recent medical and dental graduates, namely: doctor-patient relationship enhanced (due to patients presenting better history, improved communication, and consultations in a healthy environment), Time saved in consultations (makes the task easier, informed patients are helpful and give better results), Threat to patient safety (self-medication, on-compliant to medicines and advices and understanding issues) difficult to counsel(information overload), Frustration (patients stick to conclusions, lack of understanding) and Professional disregard (as patients challenge physician authority, defamation, change their doctors, lack of trust)

Conclusion: The theatrical increase of patients' access to internet health information has caused unpredictable quality impacts on the doctor-patient relationship. Future recommendations have been suggested to overcome the challenges faced by health professionals due to the online searching behaviour of patients and hence improving the health outcomes.

Keywords: doctor-patient relationship; general physician; recent medical graduates; the internet informed patients.

INTRODUCTION

Health-related information is a progressive and more accessible topic to over 3.2 billion individuals who have access to the web worldwide. Over half of Belgian persons (56%) uses the web, anecdotally referred to as 'Dr Google' to collect health-related material.[1]The Doctor-patient relationship is very important for the perseverance of the treatment of the patient and should trust each other so that better patient outcome is achieved.

In today's world, the Internet suggests easy access to health-related data, physicians increasingly have to deal with the patients who bring along information from the Internet without knowing that the information is true or not. This information sometimes causes discomfort to the doctor as the patient might judge the ability of his doctor, or self-medicate, sometimes change their physician, or even misjudge or diagnose their disease. Due to all these factors, patient safety is compromised.

At times it becomes difficult for a doctor to counsel the patient that whatever the doctor is saying is of complete benefit to the patient and sometimes the doctor-patient relationship is compromised.[2]Doctors when asked that how they deal with these patients who search 'Google', specified that they feel threatened and also that their professional expertise has been disregarded. The unwanted information compromises the time of the doctor and other patients as well.[3]

Since 'Google' offers a wide range and convenient access to health-related material,[4] doctors increasingly have to face the patients who search online and bring their queries into consultations. Recently there is a shift of power from the uninformed patients to more empowered ones who can better take care of themselves.[5]At one point informed patients communicate well, conversely, sometimes it is linked with misleading or unreliable information.[6]. Previous studies show concerns regarding pointless discussions, time-consuming dialogs, managing with vague questions, and organizing confused and misinterpreted data all of which are a challenge to doctors.[7]

Furthermore, the doctor-patient relationship is harmed due to misleading information, wrong interpretations, and fabricated discussions by the patients. With this shift from detached and silent patients to the enabled ones, doctors might have a problem with this new collaborative role where the physicians' authority is challenged. Hence the questions emerge that how doctors experience the patients who bring along data from the web, the amount of misjudged information, time spent in consultations, lack of trust in physicians, and loss of physicians control and authority over patients. Doctors' perspective is therefore very important to explore because we cannot harm any patient and we want to make sure that patients' safety is the utmost priority.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A basic qualitative study was conducted at Allama Iqbal Memorial Teaching Hospital for recent medical graduates and General Practitioner were sorted from the periphery of Sialkot. The duration of the study was 8 months.

Participants: A purposive sample of eight general practitioners and seven recent medical graduates was selected. General Practitioners from the periphery of the Sialkot region because they are most likely to receive the bulk of rural patients who are internet informed but ignorant. Recent medical graduates are best suitable for study as they are new to doctor-patient encounters and might have difficulties facing them.

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews were preferred to collect data in which a set of open-ended questions were asked from general physicians and recent medical graduates on the telephone. The questions were validated by two experts in the field of medical education and piloted by one RMG and one GP to ensure clarity. After taking informed consent from the members, an arrangement for the meet was settled agreeing to the accessibility of the interviewees. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants were maintained.

Data analysis: Manual thematic analysis was done by following the six steps of Kiger.[8]. All the audio-recorded tapes were transcribed on the same day by the first author and then sent to the second author. Transcripts were read several times to get familiarization with data then inductive coding was done through

the first and second cycle of coding. The codes were merged to form subthemes and themes.

RESULTS

Overall six themes and sixteen subthemes were identified out of which two depict the perceptions of physicians and four themes depict the problems faced by recent medical graduates.

Demographhics of participants are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Demographics of the participants of the study.

Designation	Setting	Male	Female
08 general practitioner	Periphery of Sialkot	05	03
07 recent medical graduates	Sialkot	05	02

Table 2: Perceptions of Physicians Regarding Internet Health seeking behaviour of patients.

Theme	Subtheme	Representative quote
Doctor-patient relationship enhanced	Presents a better history and prompt diagnosis	"Well-informed patients help in the making of prompt diagnosis as he presents his history better".(Gp.02)
	Improved communication	"Informed patients are helpful when they have the right information as it saves my time with diagnosis and treatment can be started earlier than expected so the doctor-patient relationship gets better."(Gp.01)
	Consultations in a healthy environment	"You get relieved that you don't have to explain more to a patient and your patient is on the right path and up to mark and your consultations are conducted in a healthy and good environment so you are at ease if the patient is well informed. (Gp.02)
Time saved in consultation	Makes task easier	"Yes I really feel happy because it makes my task easier and time-saving I don't have to waste my time in explaining the whole disease whole treatment options or pathology behind it."(GP.08)
	Informed patients are helpful	"Informed patients are helpful when they have the right information as it saves my time with diagnosis and treatment can be started earlier than expected"(Gp.05)
	Better results	'' informed patient has the right information about his signs and symptoms, it saves time and normally leads to better results. (Gp.03)

Table 3: Problems faced by recent medical graduates in dealing with google informed patients.

Theme	Subtheme	Representative quote
Threat to patient safety	Self-medication	"Google is not that bad but I would say about the self-medication aspect that overdose or underdose just by searching on the net, this should be discouraged" (HO.02)
	Non-compliant with medicines and advices	"Such patients usually stick to their information whether right or wrong and normally they are non-compliant to the medicines or lifestyle modification advised to them"(HO.02)
	Understanding issues	"The difficulty is in terms that patient comes that patient says we have already used certain medicines and cream and are not willing to understand that there are several other medicines for the same disease so they create difficulties."(HO.05)
Difficult to counsel	Information overload	"Sometimes it becomes hard to convince such patients as they don't buy your arguments no matter how valid points you present to them, whatever information they have is always right to them"(HO.01)
Frustration	Stick to their conclusions	"The patients are very over smart or try to act as if they know everything. They sometimes irritate and bothers me, they are rigid about their believes"(HO.05)
	Lack of understanding	"It irritates me as the patient has read so many things which are not useful clinically or read them wrong or does not understands completely as there is a difference in bookish or googlish things and clinical practice."(HO.03)
Professional Disregard	Challenge physicians authority	"It becomes quite difficult to entertain patients who come with information obtain via internet because they think that information on the net is given by international doctors that are much more intelligent and experienced than the local doctors here".(HO.01)
	Change their doctors	"There are many difficulties because they already know everything. For example, if they have stomachache they say that we have already used certain medication and they argue with you and sometimes change their doctor".(HO.06)
	Defamation	"Patients already knows very much about the disease and treatment but they don't know the medical terms so it becomes very difficult to transcribe them every term they ask.".(HO.05)
	Lack of trust	"Patients' waste a lot of time by arguing or asking irrelevant questions they sometimes don't trust their physicians.".(HO.01)

DISCUSSION

Current results showed that there is a threat to patient safety as patients self-medicate. The results are consistent with a longitudinal study conducted at The University of Amsterdam where according to a physician, patient who used the internet during their care had more negative views about medication.[9]Another study in Canada claimed that "Internet information generated patient misinformation, leading to confusion, distress, or an inclination towards detrimental self-diagnosis and/or Self-treatment".[10]

The doctor-patient relationship came out to be a new theme as previous studies doubted that internet information is more likely to create more problems. In another study in India, physicians perceived it pretty much good that internet-informed patients have more knowledge of health-related problems.[1]

Time saved in consultations in our results is also backed by a study conducted in America where 1050 physicians were surveyed and twenty percent of them believed that bringing internet information can help their time efficiency. Dr Google can save physicians time and patients costs as the number of visits may decline for patients having beforehand information.[2]

Patients with information overload are certainly difficult to counsel as this leads to state confusion in patients' minds and a difficult task for a physician to counsel.[3]The findings were similar to a study conducted at The University Of Texas Austin where a physician was of the view that internet-informed patients believe that whatever they have searched is right[4], are difficult to counsel[5] ,and the patient is anxious and not ready to listen to their physician.

The frustration came out to be an important theme as doctors feel frustrated because patients stick to their conclusions and they fail to understand that everything on the internet is not true. A study titled "Are physicians ready for patients with internet-based health information" also expressed physicians' concern by giving reactions like "awkward"," hard time", "nightmare", "annoying", "irritating" and "frustrating". Moreover, the

argumentative and demanding behaviour of the patient results in anger, irritability, and frustration among doctors.[6]

Our study results revealed patients' challenging physician authority, lack of trust, change of doctors, and defamation all contribute to a professional disregard. A study in London also mentioned that physicians felt patients were challenging their authority with a confidence interval of 95%. Similarly, a study on haematologists revealed that patients don't trust their physicians.[5] Patients ignore the expertise of the physician and don't trust them therefore the patient-physician relationship deteriorates.[3] Likewise, "Physicians may feel a threat of losing control over the treatment process when the patient undermined their authority". Also bringing the online information into consultation may cause conflicts and patients tend to ignore the physicians' expertise.[2]

CONCLUSION

The theatrical increase of patients' access to internet health information has caused unpredictable quality impacts on the doctor-patient relationship. The physicians, at times do appreciate the searching behaviour as it might save their time in consultations also they consider that the doctor-patient relationship is enhanced as the patient provides helpful information that can lead to proper diagnosis and treatment. On the other hand, the recent medical graduates are felt that these patients are problematic, they don't trust their physician, they stick to their conclusion that can cause frustration, and also patients are difficult to counsel.

Ethical Approval: Ethical approval was taken from The University Of Lahore under (Registration no. ERC/04/20/11 on 17th November 2020).

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