

From the Medical School

Over the last six months, I've had an amazing opportunity to try my hand at editing. I wanted to try editing because clinical decisions made as a result of an article can really be dependent on how that particular evidence is presented. To me, it seems editing can not only keep me abreast with evidence-based medicine, but perhaps more importantly, I've been allowed to develop my critiquing skills. I'll need these skills next year, as I settle into an academic junior doctor job.

It's been incredibly satisfying to watch a submission, such as an SSM, develop into a journal-friendly article. The following articles, the first on self-diagnosis through the media, the second on legionella, are two interesting articles by medical

students. Any doctor who has been given a computer print-out of a potential diagnosis or a rundown of the latest EastEnders story will be able to relate to the article on self-diagnosis. I also hope that many doctors who dealt with the legionnaire's outbreak in 2002 will find the article on legionella particularly interesting. I'll certainly be looking forward to reading this edition of the *Journal*.

If any student is interested in submitting an article for the *Journal*, please email me at Laura.Gould@doctors.org.uk

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An investigation into the role of the media in the self-diagnosis of illness

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INTRODUCTION

The media not only plays a prominent role in influencing society's opinions of the medical profession, but has also been a crucial factor in the evolution of healthcare and the way in which illness is diagnosed and managed. Diagnosis is a complex process. However, the desire for medical information and a quick self-diagnosis can lead to exclusion of vital steps in the diagnostic process, resulting in inaccurate results, and may put the patient at risk. This paper critically examines how patients use the internet, television and newspapers to diagnose their own medical problems and explores the accuracy of health information in various forms of the media, demonstrating that commercial interests can affect its reliability.

METHOD

In the case of the internet, www.google.co.uk was used to investigate one common symptom, in order to observe the ease with which a patient can acquire a diagnosis. Tiredness is commonly seen in general practice and can signify many conditions. Online diagnostic tools will be used and evaluated and, in addition, the role of television and newspaper articles in the role of self-diagnosis will be considered.

SELF-DIAGNOSIS THROUGH THE INTERNET

The opportunity to self-diagnosis through the internet is now virtually endless. Online sales of home self-testing kits have risen by 55% in the last 5 years,⁽¹⁾ allowing the 'consumer' to investigate a potential diagnosis in the home. Diagnosis is, in

fact, the most common health enquiry on the internet; Lewis discovers, in her examination of internet usage, the percentage of consumers searching material regarding the diagnosis of a specific disease is 63%, in comparison to 47% of all internet users seeking information on treatment and 44% on dietary supplements.⁽²⁾

The advent of internet search engines heralded the 'patient sleuth', the ordinary person who could research his own symptoms to obtain a diagnosis. In order to establish the ease of accessing methods of self-diagnosis via a search engine, Google was used to research the vague symptom of tiredness. On typing in 'tiredness' alone, search results included healthcare fact sheets and sponsored links and suggestions appeared including a sponsored self-diagnosing website called www.Diagnose-Me.com.⁽³⁾ Just glancing down the list of relevant matches, the diagnoses included chronic fatigue syndrome, myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), anaemia and even leukaemia, purely from a single, vague symptom of tiredness.

The risk of such search engines is clear, namely, very limited information can engender anxiety in the ordinary person through the mention of major conditions. The *Independent* warns of a 'mix-and-match self-diagnosis... many with relatively trivial symptoms have been linking them with serious diseases.'⁽⁴⁾ Conversely, there is a risk that 'red flag' symptoms of underlying, serious pathology might be misdiagnosed by the internet as a relatively minor ailment. This is not, of course, to dismiss the usefulness of medical websites altogether. As the Vice Chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners points out, such websites 'can be helpful once a diagnosis is confirmed' and 'informed patients can play a fantastic part in making their treatment work better.'⁽⁵⁾