



TIPS ON EVALUATING HEALTH CARE WEB SITES

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When I decided to become a nurse, I never could have predicted how my career would twist and turn. Not in my wildest dreams did I ever envision myself running a web site for nurses! Your careers will probably be even more diverse than mine, taking you down many paths that will enable you to apply your nursing skills in areas that you cannot even imagine now – because they are areas that have not yet been invented! You are fortunate enough to have the internet as your information tool. The internet is changing the world in ways we cannot even conceive of today, and it's a tool you will use more and more as new content and sources of information invade cyberspace!

What can the web do for you today? First and foremost, it can help you find information to help you in nursing school, particularly resources for academic research. It can also help with patient care. While there are many wonderful web sites out there, there are many unreliable ones as well. It's my job in this article to help you distinguish between them. This article describes criteria for evaluating web sites, lists organizations that promote ethical practices in health care, and provides tips on how to get started "surfing" the web for reliable information.

Basic Web Evaluation Skills

There are many web sites that provide checklists for evaluating web sites.

My favorite is the Wolfgram Memorial Library at Widener University (www2.widener.edu/Wolfgram-Memorial-Library/webevaluation/webeval.htm). The article "Evaluating Web Resources" by Alexander and Tate, provides the clearest and most comprehensive information on web evaluation I have seen.¹ The authors offer guidelines to help users categorize web sites according to their main purpose, ie. advocacy, business/marketing, informational, news, and personal sites. They provide links to sites that exemplify a web site with each of those purposes and list specific criteria appropriate for evaluating each type of site. The tutorial lists essential criteria along with hints on how to determine if the criteria are being met. Following are criteria for determining if a web site measures up:

- 1. Timeliness.** Is there a date on the home page, and if so, is it the current date or the date the content was last updated?
- 2. Authority and Accuracy.** Who wrote or is responsible for the content? Is it from a primary or secondary source? Can you easily identify the authors and their credentials? Is contact



information on the authors or related organizations/sources provided, so that you can verify the accuracy of the information or do further research?

3. Objectivity and Completeness.

Is the topic covered in-depth, or are there glaring omissions? For example, are opposing viewpoints presented, or is the article merely an "infomercial" provided by a company with a product or service to sell?

These are just a few of the types of pitfalls you need to watch for. I encourage you to visit hitiweb.mittek.org/docs/criteria.html, sponsored by the Health Information Technology Institute, which features a regularly updated

article about an ongoing project dedicated to improving the quality of health information on the internet. There are many well-known and highly qualified people working on this paper, including nurse experts. Their goal is to develop criteria to assess the quality of health information on the internet and to educate the consumer, the content provider and the policy maker on these criteria.

Organizations Concerned with Ethical Practices for Health Care Web Sites

Several organizations are devoted to setting standards and codes of conduct for web sites offering health care information. Three of these organizations, Hi-Ethics (www.hiethics.com), Health on the Net (HON) Foundation (www.hon.ch), and the Internet Health-care Coalition (www.ihealthcoalition.org) have formed a committee to collaborate on developing common codes. Health on the Net offers a graphic HONcode seal that can be posted on web sites agreeing to adhere to the HON Code of Conduct. The seal is a good indicator that the web site as one offers reliable and comprehensive information, but you are the final judge as to the value and quality of the content.

Safe Surfing

Once you have acquired your web evaluation skills, where can you begin surfing for reliable, current information? Some of the best web sites are those maintained by the U.S. Government. The National Library of Medicine (NLM) web site, for example, (www.nlm.nih.gov) is a great place to start. The NLM PubMed site (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Literature/index.html) provides resource articles for your academic papers as well as valuable links. NLM's MedlinePlus (www.medlineplus.gov) is an excellent site, where patients can find reliable information about their illnesses, complete with photos and diagrams. Another reliable consumer web site worth exploring is www.healthfinder.gov, a free gateway to reliable consumer health and human services information developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The web site provides links to selected online publications, clearinghouses, databases,

web sites, and support and self-help groups, as well as the government agencies and not-for-profit organizations that produce reliable information for the public.

For good consumer health care information, you can often rely on the web sites of organizations that have been around for a long time – ones you may have seen mentioned in textbooks, journals, and other reliable sources. The American Diabetes Association (www.diabetes.org) is a good example. Be certain to check the names and affiliations of web sites, however. Sometimes, web sites adopt names similar to those of well established organizations, but they are not the official organization. (Check out quackwatch.com for lists of "questionable" web sites.)

A further source of information are nonprofit organizations. The American Nurses Association web site, (www.nursingworld.org) has great information on nursing trends and news, and particularly on political issues that affect nursing practice. In addition, many university libraries maintain lists of reliable web sites. Two of the larger ones are the University of Buffalo (ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/hsl/internet/nsgites.html) and the Hardin Meta Directory of Internet Health Sources at the University of Iowa (www.lib.uiowa.edu/hardin/md/nurs.html). The Oregon Health Sciences University hosts CliniWeb International (www.ohsu.edu/clinweb/), which has a browser that helps structure search terms on PubMed using appropriate MeSH (Medical Subject Heading) terms.

Finally, for nursing career information, www.nursingcenter.com, the web site that I oversee, will no doubt be useful to you. The web site began in 1995, and has grown to include dozens of journals, forums, news, a career center, and an online RN to BSN completion program offered through the University of Wisconsin.

Anytime you are skeptical about a web site or the information on it, seek the opinion of a faculty member or an experienced nurse, or post a question on a listserv to find out if others have had positive or negative experiences with the web site. Also, despite the fact that we live in the age of electronic information, don't rely entirely on the web to

find answers, as not all the information on a given topic has made the move to cyberspace!

Who knows what the future of the internet holds! In the years to come, applications will arise that we cannot even conceive of today. But in the end, remember that the internet is a tool, and any tool is only as good as the person using it. Learn to use it well, and happy surfing!

The author is Executive Director of NursingCenter.com, the nursing web portal of Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, and has been involved in the design and development of multimedia products for 15 years.

WEB SITES MENTIONED IN THIS ARTICLE

- hitiweb.mittek.org/docs/criteria.html
- www.hon.ch
- www.ihealthcoalition.org
- www.nlm.nih.gov
- www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Literature/index.html
- www.medlineplus.gov
- www.healthfinder.gov
- www.diabetes.org
- ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/hsl/internet/nsgites.html
- www.lib.uiowa.edu/hardin/md/nurs.html
- www.ohsu.edu/clinweb/
- www.nursingcenter.com

SUGGESTED READING

- Hodson-Carlton K, Dorner JL. (1999). An electronic approach to evaluating healthcare web resources. *Nurse Educator*, Sept-Oct;24(5):21-6.
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- Nicoll, L.H. (2000). Computers in Nursing's: *Nurses' guide to the internet* (3rd ed.) Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.