Health related information on the web - a quality concept

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Introduction. The rapid progression of information technology has shown great impact on the way health related information is consumed and provided. Prior to the information technology age, health information was mainly exchanged in a personal way mostly in a direct communication. This has fundamentally changed as consumers as well as producers of health information make excessive use of the new opportunities offered by online health information. This paper presents an analysis of relevant earlier approaches and scientific publications addressing the quality of health related online information. It then presents generic criteria for health related information on the web.

Methods. The collection of relevant materials was done searching the World Wide Web between August and October 2007 and peer reviewed journals (from 1997 to 2007). Information retrieval was mainly done using PubMed and Google. The analysis of the sources was done by two independent coders who assigned the criteria given in the various documents to a pre-defined scheme. As a coarse scheme for structuring we used the quality criteria given by the European Union in its eEurope 2002 program.

Results. Our search resulted in an initial list of 94 papers and 40 internet sites. 42 of the retrieved papers and 15 internet sites were included in further analysis. The analysis of the remaining sources yielded 31 quality criteria which were divided into six categories. The category “Transparency and Honesty” comprises criteria that deal with the provider of information especially in terms of the purpose of content provision, namely Provider, Purpose, Funding, Advertising, Doctor-Patient-relationship and conflict of interest. Category “Authority” deals with criteria which relate to the sources of information provided (Authorship and Sources of information). Accuracy of Information includes the following criteria: Editorial process/policy, Reliability of information, Completeness, Timeliness and Relevance. The category “Accessibility and Layout” comprehends a large amount of criteria as it is targeted towards the regulation of findability, searchability, readability, usability and all other criteria that deal with access to content and its layout. “Privacy and Data protection” includes all criteria that are related to the processing, storage and protection of sensitive data. The criteria are e.g. Privacy policy, Encryption or legal issues. “Accountability” addresses all criteria in the field of responsibility for the content provided.

Discussion. The majority of the analyzed publications share the same selection of criteria. Yet, there is a wide range of different interpretation and naming. Throughout our work an integrated approach which addresses all quality aspects could not be found. Hence there is a lack of concepts that could be used as a basis for individual quality concepts. The present paper focuses on a set of generic reusable quality criteria for the assessment of health information on the net. This generic set of criteria is not limited to a specific application context and can easily be enlarged.

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