Improving the transparency of health information found on the internet through the HONcode: an impact study

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Outline

- Context of the study
- Methodology
- HONcode and Health website certification
- Evaluations
- Conclusions
In 2002, the French authorities, worrying about the quality of the health websites and their information given to the public, passed a law (loi n°2004-810 about the health insurance) mandating the HAS (Haute Autorité de Santé- National French Health Authority) to establish a certification process of health websites:

« The Haute Autorité de Santé is in charge of drawing up a procedure of certification of health related websites … ».

The HON has been selected and appointed by the HAS as the official organization to certified French health website.

Do health websites not asking for HONcode certification (Control sample websites A) respect elementary ethical standards such as the HONcode?

This study was conducted by the HAS with the cooperation of HON.
Control the quality of health websites?

- “Health searches impacted treatment decision on six in ten e-patients”

- “Three-quarters of health seekers do not check the source and date of the health information they find online”

- Increased anxiety after consulting the Internet for health information

Cyberchondria: Studies of the Escalation of Medical Concerns in Web Search, Microsoft Dec. 2008

Sources: E-patients With a Disability or Chronic Disease, Oct. 2007, Pew internet & American Life project, pewinternet.org
The Health On the Net

Created in 1996, HON is a not-for-profit foundation.

Mission: HON guides Internet users by highlighting reliable, comprehensible, relevant and trustworthy sources of online health and medical information, tackling the major downsides of the Web:
- the overwhelming quantity of information
- the uneven quality of health information available online

Funded by the Geneva state, the European Commission, and the French National Health Authority.
### Presentation of the HONcode principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Requirement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authority</strong></td>
<td>The author’s qualifications must be specified</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Complementarity</strong></td>
<td>Information should support, not replace, the doctor-patient relationship; Mission and Audience of site?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Privacy</strong></td>
<td>Respect for privacy and confidentiality of personal data submitted by visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attribution</strong></td>
<td>Source(s) of published information must be provided and pages containing health information must be dated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Justification</strong></td>
<td>Site must back up claims relating to benefits and efficiency of treatments or drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transparency</strong></td>
<td>Accessible presentation, identification of editor and Webmaster, accurate contact details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial disclosure</strong></td>
<td>Sources of funding must be disclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sponsorship</strong></td>
<td>Clear distinction between advertising and editorial content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[www.HON.ch/HONcode/ → eEurope 2002 Quality Criteria for Health related Websites](www.HON.ch/HONcode/)
**Study Design**

- **Longitudinal Evaluation after 6 months of certification**
  - 165 French HONcode certified websites (group A)
  - T0 = certification request
  - T1 = certification delivery
  - T2 = 6 months after the certification

- **Comparison between certified websites and website not asking for certification**
  - Group A: 165 sites certified for 6 months
  - Control sample: 165 non-certified websites (group B)

- **Judgment criteria: HONcode non conformance**
  - Non conformance noticed after 6 months
  - Non conformance to the principles 1-4-5-8
Methodology

- Review regarding the HONcode principles
- 2 reviewers for each site
- Respect or non-respect of each HONcode principle was scored 0 (in conformity) or 1 (in nonconformity)
- Website in conformity = total of its scores is equal to 0
- Focus on the conformity to HONcode principles 1, 4, 5 and 8
Results

Compliance to the HONcode
- Control: 0.6
- CW: 89

Compliance to principles 1, 4, 5, 8
- CW: 1.18
- CW: 92
Results

1’087 non conformity noticed for control group versus 27 for group A (CW)
Conclusion

Outside the certification, the respect of the HONcode principles is low: 0.6% of control group respected all the HONcode principles.

Certification: an efficient mean to respect HONcode principles in a sustainable way.

Limitation
- The interobserver agreement assessor has not been evaluated and the site evaluated was not blinded.
- Evaluation performed of 2 experimented HON evaluators.

Certification process leads to respect ethical criteria => improvement of the production of health information process.
Thank you for your attention

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