

## **Online health information seeking and information quality: a preliminary contemplation**

### **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Previous studies have suggested that patients' online health information seeking affects their medical consultations and patient-doctor relationships. An up-to-date picture of patients' online health information-seeking behaviors can inform and prepare frontline health care professionals to collaborate, facilitate, or empower their patients to access and manage health information found online. **Objective:** This study explores the prevalence, patterns, and predictors of online health information-seeking behaviors among primary care patients in Hong Kong, and the relations between online health information seeking and electronic health (eHealth) literacy. **Methods:** Patients attending a university primary care clinic in Hong Kong were asked to complete a questionnaire survey on their demographic backgrounds; health status; frequency and pattern of online health information seeking; contents, sources, and reasons for online health information seeking; and their eHealth literacy. eHealth literacy was measured by the validated eHealth Literacy Scale (eHEALS). Regression analyses explored various demographic and behavioral predictors to online health information seeking, and predictors to eHealth literacy. **Results:** In all, 97.32% (1162/1194) respondents used the internet, of which 87.44% (1016/1162) had used the internet to find health information. Most respondents (65.97%, 665/1008) searched once monthly or more. Few (26.88%, 271/1008) asked their doctor about health information found online, but most doctors (56.1%, 152/271) showed little or no interest at all. The most sought topic was symptom (81.59%, 829/1016), the top reason was noticing new symptoms or change in health (70.08%, 712/1016), the most popular source was online encyclopedia (69.98%, 711/1016), and the top reason for choosing a source was convenience (55.41%, 563/1016). Poisson regression analysis identified high eHEALS score, fair or poor self-rated health, having a chronic medical condition, and using the internet several times a day as significant predictors of online health information seeking. Multiple regression analysis identified lower age, better self-rated health, more frequent internet use, more frequent online health information seeking, and more types of health information sought as significant predictors to higher eHealth literacy. **Conclusions:** Online health information seeking is prevalent among primary care patients in Hong Kong, but only a minority shared the information with doctors. Websites were chosen more for convenience than for accuracy or authoritativeness. Doctors should recognize patients' online health information-seeking behavior, and facilitate and empower them to search for high-quality online health information.

**Keyword:** Online health information seeking; eHealth literacy; Primary care; Hong Kong