Methods: we surveyed a sample of patients attending urology outpatient clinics in a one week period.
Results: use of the internet decreases with increasing age. However 75% of ages 65–69 and 55% of over 80’s access the internet, with most doing so at least weekly. Whilst health-related information is very relevant, only 20% of patients had looked at the hospital departmental website prior to a visit.

Conclusion: as health professionals we must ensure that we have relevant up-to-date information on our websites for patients to access of all age ranges. Departments should give consideration to courses or other novel methods (e.g. computers in GP surgeries, text to speech software, etc) to improve internet access in older people.

Keywords: aged, aged 80 and over, Internet, consumer health information, older people

Introduction

From its humble beginnings in the early 1960s, the World Wide Web has grown to be an essential part of our daily lives; both at work and at home. Once thought to be too complicated for the general public, it is now estimated to be accessed by over 30% of the world’s population and that figure continues to grow [1]. In the UK, there are 38.3 million (77% of the population) Internet users and the majority of users (30.1 million) access the Internet every day [2].

A key aim of the government health policy is to continue to increase the choice within the NHS. It is therefore vital that hospitals and GP’s offer good up-to-date information on websites to attract ‘business’ in the modern NHS. They also offer an excellent way to disseminate information such as by procedure- or disease-specific information leaflets. But who are we targeting and what do they want? It is often assumed that most Internet users are young and middle aged. We have personal experience of patients in their 80’s choosing our department over their local one based on the professionalism of our urology website. We therefore set out to identify who accessed our website and conducted a survey across our clinics in order to see how regularly patients accessed the Internet.

We have a purpose-built urology centre where all our clinics are held. A representative sample of all our clinics was obtained. In total 183 patients returned the survey which was completed in the clinic. The patients had the option of completing it themselves or we would go through the questions with them.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of Internet access and the age demographic in our sample (see Table 1 in Appendix 1 in the Supplementary data available in Age and Ageing online). Of the 183 patients, 25% had never accessed the Internet. The likelihood of never using the Internet increased with age, from 5% for ages 40–49 to 45% for ages 80 and above. While this is perhaps not surprising, it does also mean that even in the over-80’s more than half do use the Internet and the majority of them use it either daily or a few times per week.

We then asked if they have access to the Internet at home, as more older patients may not. We found that generally the availability at home tends to decrease with increasing age (Figure 2). Although the availability is highest in the younger age groups, a majority of older patients do also have access to the Internet at home (72, 59 and 55% of patients in the age ranges 65–69, 70–79 and 80+ respectively). This shows the importance of ensuring websites are targeted to all age groups.

Finally, we were interested to know whether our own patients had accessed our own departmental website (www.gstt.nhs.uk/urology). We have spent a considerable amount of time developing our site with the help of our patients to include a large number of staff details, information leaflets and useful resources. Overall 20% of patients had done so, with very few having done so over the age of 70. Interestingly, a very similar proportion had accessed their GP website (see Appendix 1 in the Supplementary data available in Age and Ageing online). Although the feedback about our website has been positive, these numbers are disappointing.

Figure 1. Percentage of patients accessing the Internet according to age (n = 183 patients) (for absolute figures, see Appendix 1 in the Supplementary data available in Age and Ageing online).
Our results suggest slightly better results than those from the Office for National Statistics. Their figures show that in 2010, 60% of over-65’s had never used the Internet. Of those who had, 59% use it on a daily basis, 28% at least once per week and 13% once a month or less. Their results also show Internet use to be the highest in London, which may explain our results. The statistics also reveal what people use the Internet for. The over-65 age group appears to have high use for sending emails (87%) and looking for information (72%). As might be expected, they use it less for online banking (34%), reading newspapers or magazines (40%), chatting or blogging (8%) and shopping (22%). However, when it comes to seeking health-related information, 36% do use the Internet for this purpose. This compares well with the average for all age groups (39%). This clearly shows that health information is of interest to older people and it should be adapted appropriately. The *Daily Telegraph* picked up on these data and reported that Internet use has tripled among people of pensionable age living alone over the decade from 11% in 2000 to 40% in 2010 (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/internet/8018203/Elderly-living-alone-use-internet-to-keep-in-touch-with-family.html).

So what can health-care professionals do to help? Firstly, all departments need to look at their hospital or GP website and review the content for all age groups. We recently reviewed all urology websites in England and GP surgeries in two primary care trusts. The results are worrying and indicative of the importance given to NHS websites: 33% of all urology departments in England do not even have a webpage on their hospital pages. Of those that do, the majority were single pages with little information. Similarly, a third of GP’s in a recent audit did not have a website either. It appears clear from the data from the Office for National Statistics and our data that older people do wish to access this type of information and work needs to be done to improve the content available.

Having established a website, it is important to keep the information up-to-date and current. To do this, it is better to have smaller amounts of high-quality up-to-date information rather than a lot of outdated pages. We would suggest appointing a web editor within the department to keep the content current (the actual formatting, changes and uploading should all be done by the local IT department). Many people, especially older people, find it difficult to read small text. Therefore, attention should be made to ensure it is in a clear font (usually sans serif). The text should also be written in plain English avoiding medical jargon and it is often useful to ask non-medical members of the department to read it.

What can be done to help older people? For the visually impaired, there are free software programs that can convert text to speech. Examples of these include Thunder© and BrowseAloud (http://www.screenreader.net/, http://www.browsealoud.com/page.asp?pg_id=80002). In our survey of 145 English hospitals with Urology services, very few offered this service although the numbers are improving. Does your hospital? For this software to work, web pages should be written so that hyperlinks can be understood from the text as the program automatically detects the link and reads it out. For example ‘click here’ is not of much use and should be avoided. Instead include the page description, e.g. ‘For more information click Information Leaflets’.

Other programs employ a magnification application designed to make the page easier to read or physical devices that attach to the front of the screen for the same purpose. Further programs have been introduced...
that reduce the need for a mouse—designed to aid arthritis sufferers—allowing the webpage to be controlled by the keyboard alone. High-visibility keyboards may also be useful for the visually impaired. A cheaper alternative is to purchase high-visibility stickers which can be attached to an existing standard keyboard (for examples of the BrowseAloud interface and magnifying application, see Figures 4–6 in Appendix 1 in the Supplementary data available in Age and Ageing online). In a recent survey conducted by the ONS in 2011, individuals were asked why they did not own an Internet connection within their home. The most common response by 50% said they did not need it, but 21% said a lack of skills prevented them from having it [4]. This is likely to be very prevalent in the older population. To encourage computer literacy, Age UK organises promotional weeks with events nationwide to help older people develop IT skills (http://www.ageuk.org.uk/work-and-learning/technology-and-internet/events/). They organise the delightfully titled ‘tea and biscuits week’ to help people learn about computers and modern technology and also ‘myfriends online week’ to help teach about the social side of the Internet. Although there are a number of books designed to teach older people basic computer skills, it seems a paradox that most IT courses are advertised online. This may be useful if friends or family can help but is of no use to someone starting off using a computer. Maybe GP practices and elderly care departments could offer these services.

In conclusion, although lower than other age groups, Internet use is common among the over-65’s and this will only increase in the future. As a group they are interested in health information and we should ensure that we not only have suitable content for them but also ensure our websites are accessible and readable.

Key points

- In the UK there are 38.3 million Internet users representing 77% of the population.
- Websites offer an easy way of disseminating information both to other health-care professionals and patients.
- In our survey, the likelihood of never using the Internet increased with age from 5% for ages of 4–49 to 45% for ages of 80 and over.
- Seventy-two per cent of patients in the age range 60–69 and 55% of over-80 year olds do have the Internet at home.
- All departments should look at their web presence and consider someone as a web editor/web lead for that area.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data mentioned in the text is available to subscribers in Age and Ageing online.

References


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Vitamin D and orthostatic hypotension

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