Internet use for medical research among cancer patients and their relatives in Spain

The use of Internet as a source of medical information is increasing as the new technologies become more accessible. As a result of this, a high number of ill people use the Web to search general information and treatment possibilities [1]. A cancer diagnosis involves a substantial anxiety about its prognosis and the effectiveness of its treatment; therefore, both this population and the companions are specially critic about the information received by clinicians and will look forward to obtain as much advice as possible [2]. For all this, we conducted a structured interview study with the aim to examine for the first time in Spain the medical use of Internet by cancer patients and their families. From June 2006 until September 2007, 99 patients and 65 relatives were selected by convenience sampling from an urban tertiary hospital of the National Security System and from two different national health clinics of a rural area. Local research ethics committees approved the trial protocol and all subjects were
asked for written informed consent. *-tests were performed to compare the quantitative variables and chi-square tests were conducted to examine the association between category variables.

Previous studies have estimated a frequency of Internet use among cancer patients ranging from 6% to 50% [3]. In our series, we found a very low rate of self-use reported among patients (18%) which may be attributed to the sociodemographic situation of the interviewees: patient median age was 62, most of them did not have a university degree nor a remunerated job (the majority were retired or worked as housewife). Basch et al. [4] also found that younger age and higher education were associated with the likelihood of using Internet for cancer information. Among nonusers, a high number (91%) would like to have the chance to make a search, even though the reasons pointed out for not doing it were the preference of obtaining information from doctors (physicians were considered the primary source of health related information) and the lack of access to a computer. All these contrast with the fact that only the 11.8% of Internet users recognized discussing the findings with the physician, mainly for lack of time during clinical encounter, results similar to previous studies [5].

Even though our study was a convenience sample with a small size and further studies are necessary, we might conclude that the use of Internet to obtain cancer-related information is not very extended in our country, though many patients and relatives would desire to do so. Among users, the degree of satisfaction achieved is low, and only a reduced subgroup discusses the findings with the physician. Therefore, Public Health Authorities should contemplate the elaboration of newer guidelines in the Web aimed at cancer population in an effort to improve the information and care offered and to clear up misunderstandings which will decrease the anxiety and fear of patients.

M. López-Gómez1*, J. Feliú2, M. Sereno1, C. Gómez-Raposo1 & E. Casado-Saénz1

1Department of Clinical Oncology, Infanta Sofía Hospital, 2Department of Clinical Oncology, University Hospital La Paz, Madrid, Spain
(*E-mail: miriam.lopez@telefonica.net)

references


doi:10.1093/annonc/mdn599