Get set for the net

Information retrieval for dermatologists - An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

The use of the internet in all fields of medicine is becoming more and more common in most areas of the world. The factors contributing to limited or no usage are difficulty of access due to poor IT infrastructure, paucity of time and lack of awareness and knowledge of the optimal use of the internet. For healthcare professionals, lack of time is one of the most common reasons for venturing into anything new. The only way to tackle this is to make a conscious commitment to learning how to use the Internet effectively. The least that one could strive to do is to learn enough to get internet usage handled by junior colleagues, secretaries and external resources, and expect the best of outputs from each. This article will focus on the internet for dermatologists. It will cover a range of resources and include search techniques and evaluation criteria.

KEY WORDS: Information retrieval, Information resources, India

The internet is a vast network of computers spanning the entire globe. The world of medicine is equally limitless, practically knowing no confines.¹ Print information in medicine is voluminous enough; internet technologies with quick means of information retrieval, communication and publishing have resulted in the availability of too much information. The difference between the print era and the current internet age is predominantly the “lack of control” in what is being published and made available. Too much information - bad and good - is a problem in itself.

In the Indian context, there is yet another issue that makes the problem worse. The use of information resources, both print and electronic, is not formally taught as part of any curriculum as it is done in countries like the USA and the UK.² Due to this lacuna, a majority of health professionals in India do not use the internet, or when they do, are not able to handle it, get what they want, or filter what they do not want. The result is frustration and extreme feelings about not wanting to use or rely on the Internet at all!

How does a health professional incorporate the use of the internet in one’s professional life? For a start, recognize that one needs to use it as a communication tool, a publishing tool and an information resource; the latter, exactly the way one would use a library. A medical library contains different types of resources - books, journals, bound volumes of journals, newsletters, bulletins, etc. The library has primary resources like journals that have peer-reviewed, scientific articles, drug information resources like the PDR, CIMS, etc. Secondary resources like indexes

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The internet provides direct access to some primary resources and also access to such resources through secondary resources. For example, one can reach the website of this journal directly, by going to: http://www.ijdvl.com/, or indirectly, through the Indian Medlars Centre’s Indian Biomedical Journals’ Database at http://medind.nic.in/imvw/ and choosing this journal’s title from this secondary resource.

In order to know how to locate such resources on the Internet, there are two methods – one is to locate a good directory of websites (this is like the subject catalog in a medical library) and browse through a list of available resources. The other is to use a “search engine” – to look for something specific. Searching the internet and its deeper areas is an art and the more one learns to do this well, the better are the results retrieved.

To begin locating good sites on dermatology, a very good starting point is the Hardin Meta Directory of Internet Health Sources. This is a service hosted by the University of Iowa, USA and is a “tertiary resource”. It is a “list of lists” of websites and resources in all medical fields. For dermatology, the meta-list, located at: http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/hardin/md/derm.html, gives a list of diseases and conditions in dermatology. Further down this page is a list of links for dermatology as a specialty. Clicking any of these links - diseases or dermatology as a specialty - leads to another list, each compiled by a reputed organization or institution.

The Hardin Meta Directory has criteria based on which they select such lists. Hence this is a good starting point to access one or more directories of your choice. You could begin with the small lists and work your way to larger ones. Having located this starting point, you can begin to browse some of the sites that you find on any list. You should make it a point to browse at least one site once or twice a week. While browsing you may find sites that you would visit regularly, others that you would rarely visit and yet other sites that you serendipitously discover. How do you tackle these different scenarios?

Sites that you would go back to regularly should be bookmarked (Bookmarks in Netscape and Favorites in Internet Explorer). Sites that are not useful or relevant at first glance are best forgotten. In the third scenario, there is a strong temptation to spend too much time going through the site. A strong recommendation is to immediately ask yourself whether you think you would
use the information in the immediate or near future. If you think that you would, then bookmark the site and plan a specific time when you would view and evaluate it. If not, leave it alone too! It is best not getting carried away doing something different from what you were planning to do. Also, don’t forget to categorize your bookmarks either with some specific categories like association websites, journal websites, etc. Or simply classify them by importance. That way you are more likely not to get carried away by the less important sites.

Evaluating sites:
The following are some of the fundamental criteria for evaluating websites (these are very similar to evaluating print resources like books and journal articles):
1. **Is the information authoritative?** Check if the website is put up by a reputed association, publisher or individual.
2. **Is it recent?** Check how often the website is updated. You may accept a textbook that is two years old, but a website needs to be updated at every possible opportunity.
3. **Is the website well organized?** You would expect a book to have a Table of Contents as well as a good index at the end to lead you to specific areas of the book. You would also expect some sort of organization of information within the book. Similarly a website should have information organized in a manner by which you can find what you want with relative ease. A good website will also have a site-map (equivalent of the TOC in print) and/or a Search facility (which is the equivalent of the index); only being electronic, the index should retrieve information faster and quicker than a print version will.
4. **What is the purpose of the website?** Websites by themselves are rarely, if at all, peer-reviewed. Many websites may have “scientific matter” but if one reads between lines the intention may be more oriented towards promotions and sales. It is generally much easier to accept information put up by a scientific body such as a medical association or a government organization than a corporate entity, but this is not always true. One needs to learn to evaluate content and, if required, verify its authenticity by comparing similar information put up by other organizations.

**REFERENCES**


**NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

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**Manipal Association of Skin Alumni (MASA)**

The department of Skin and STD, KMCH Manipal will be hosting the I Alumni meeting on 16th October 2004 at Manipal.

**For further details contact:**

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