THE SAFETY OF MEDECINES, A EUROPEAN REQUIREMENT
Certification of Health Websites

Célia BOYER
Executive Director, Health on the Net Foundation (HON)

"The HONcode is your guide to trustworthy health information."

Who has never searched for health information on Google or visited a health website for advice? Eight in ten of us look for health information online and the Internet certainly represents a positive step towards patient empowerment. However, along with great advantages come significant challenges, particularly regarding the trustworthiness of health information and the privacy and protection of personal health data.

The Internet is bursting with information about conventional medicine, alternative medicine, wellness, nutrition and so forth. But many of the millions and millions of pages dedicated to health can be misleading, contradicting, inaccurate, or designed to sell products. Even the most experienced Web user can get confused at times with no awareness on the variation of the quality of health information online. So browsing through these pages can cause more anxiety than you need and can promote the development of hypochondria after reading all the information available on the Internet which can result in more frequent visits to the physician’s office. At the other extreme are patients who underestimate the severity of their condition based on health information they see online and fail to consult a physician on time. Acting solely based on online health information is potentially dangerous and might end up in higher costs to the healthcare system.

So how do you find the most trustworthy and useful information from the vast pool of online health information on the Internet?

How to identify trustworthy health information

The Health On the Net Foundation (HON, www.HealthOnNet.org), created in Geneva in 1995 with the support of WHO, CERN and the European Commission, has the mission to guide Internet users to useful and trustworthy health information. To achieve this, HON Foundation, a non-governmental organization, has established a code of ethics for health-related websites, known as the HON Code of Conduct (HONcode).

In practice, the HONcode is controlled through a certification process. Health websites apply for the voluntary, free-of-charge HONCode certification. It is important to stress that HON not only evaluates a site but also advises the webmaster on what should be amended and how. The certification is done in a pedagogical way in order to incite the persons responsible to modify their web content production process and integrate the elementary HONCode principles such as disclosure of the author qualifications and editorial policy, how the confidentiality is taken care of, funding sources, the separation between advertising, references, sources of content used and date of last modification. After final evaluation by the HONCode team, once the site respects the HONcode, the site is allowed to display the HONCode seal.

At present, there is no harmonized legislation specifically regulating health websites except in France where in 2002, the French authorities, worrying about the quality of the health websites and their information given to the public, passed a law (n°2004-810 about health insurance) mandating the National French Health Authority (Haute Autorité de Santé - HAS) to establish a certification process of health websites. HON has been selected and appointed by the HAS as the official organization to certified French health websites.

Currently, more than 8,300 websites are HONcode certified in over 100 countries, 4,400 websites in 24 European countries, and 1,500 websites certified in France.

When a website is certified, the following questions are addressed in the website:

- Does the website provide details about the editor or the main author of the content, including their credentials?
- Does the website state that its purpose is to support, not to replace, the physician-patient relationship?
- Does the website inform you about how they use your personal data?

- Does the website display dates of last modification and allow access to the original sources of information?
- Does the website justify their claims about the performance of a specific treatment, product or service?
- Does the website present the webmaster’s contact details of a contact form that’s easily accessible?
- Are the websites sources of funding clearly described?
- Does the website make a clear distinction between advertisement and editorial content?

These elements are checked again during the periodical reviews of certified websites. Through the HONCode certification, HON aims to provide all users easy access to websites that present and produce health information in a transparent manner. But taking into consideration the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of the Internet, the websites are always fully responsible for their content and the HON Foundation relies on the online community to monitor health websites.

To recognize a certified site, look for the HONCode logo and click on the seal to get more details. You can also download the HONCode toolbar, so that a single click checks the site you are visiting. In addition, HON has developed HONcodeHP, a search engine specialized in health, presenting search results without any advertising and only of certified sites.

When you are browsing through health websites, the HONCode will guide you towards trustworthy and transparent information.

Useful links
More information about the HONcode: http://www.hon.ch/HONcodePro/Conduct.html
The HONCode Toolbar and other tools for patients: http://www.hon.ch/HONcodePatients/visitor_safeUse2.html
The specialized HON search engine: www.honcodehunt.org

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