Health On the Net Foundation
Non Governmental Organization

The HONcode
Quality of health related information on the Web: the HONcode certification

The HON Foundation is a Non-governmental Organization dedicated to improving the quality of information intended for the general public and to facilitating quick access to the most relevant and up to date medical information for medical professionals. The Foundation is internationally known for its pioneering work in the field of health information ethics, notably for the establishment of its code of ethical conduct, the HONcode. The HONcode is the most widely accepted reference for online health and medical publishers.

The HONcode: a certification System

Who can request for it? Any health or medical web site, intended for patients, health workers or the general public, whether or not it has a strictly medical focus.

The request for certification is explicit and voluntary: Site administrators must take the initiative to apply for HONcode certification. Requests are made through the HON website.

Review and verification: Each request for certification is examined by a member of the HON team. HON makes a thorough visit of the site and verifies, according to detailed available guidelines, if all eight of the HONcode ethical principles are respected.

Active Certification: The site is certified by HON when the site not only complies with the HONcode principles but also demonstrates how each principle is implemented. A site which is found to respect the eight HONcode principles is given a unique dynamic seal to place on their pages.

Regular monitoring: An accredited site receives a check-up visit periodically, beginning one year after initial certification, in case of technical malfunction detected by our monitoring services or following a complaint.

Quality & Trustworthiness of the Medical & Health Internet

HON is the precursor, publishing a voluntary code of conduct for online medical and health information, the HONcode. HON is the only organisation enforcing its code through a formal application/certification process with annual auditing, all free of charge.

Its code of conduct, the HONcode is now a de facto standard for trustworthy online information used by thousands of health and medical web publishers which aims to protect citizens from false or misleading health or medical information. It came about when consultations brought together webmasters, citizens and experts, who reached a consensus on an 8-point code, now in use by nearly 5,700 web sites. The qualifying web sites form a 'confidence-space', where users could safely explore their information options.

The HONcode requires that information providers disclose the authority of the information provided, confidentiality and privacy policy, proper attribution of sources, transparency of financial sponsorship and relationship between advertising and editorial content.

All HON Services are freely available.

The eight HONcode Principles at a glance

Full version available at
http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html

Authority
If medical advice or information is given, the website must inform visitors if it is provided by a health professional or not, along with all relevant credentials.

Complementarity
A clear statement for its purpose to support, not replace, the doctor-patient relationship.

Confidentiality
Confidentiality of data relating to individual patients and visitors to a medical/health Web site, is respected by this Web site.

Attribution
Refer properly to source information. The date when a clinical page was last modified will be clearly displayed.

Justifiability
Justify claims about benefits & performance of a specific treatment, commercial service or product.

Transparency of authorship
Identify site developers, authors & Webmaster and a valid contact address should be easely accessible.

Transparency of sponsorship
Present financial backers.

Honesty in advertising & editorial policy
Clearly separate advertising from editorial, if advertising is a funding source.

The certification is based on these eight principles

The need for certification of medical websites

Health information comes from a wide range of sources - friends and family, general print media, specialist print media, television and radio, and the Internet. Everyone is subjected to 'health information' all the time – some is absorbed passively, while some is actively sought out. A North American survey, conducted in July 2005, found that 74% of Internet users, or half of all adults, go online in search of health information[1].

In 2004, the number of users worldwide connected to the Internet reached 934 million[2], more than 1 billion projected for 2005. In the European Union[3], nearly half of all persons go online. Concurrent with this growing usage is the growing number of health web pages (629,000,000 results for the search term "health" on Google), available online. Protection of consumers by offering an easy access to trustworthy information is becoming of major importance. Of several options that have been proposed, the idea of a Code of Conduct respected by websites is the most widely accepted.

Focus on the Press
Poor Quality Websites on CAM dangerous for cancer patients[4]

"The cancer cures discussed on CAM websites are not supported by good scientific evidence," according to a study published in the Annals of Oncology conducted on the 32 most popular web sites on CAM (Complementary and Alternative Medicine).

As an action plan, the study concludes that "cancer organisations and other impartial interest groups should investigate websites and create and administer a 'seal of approval', for safety and reliability, such as the HONcode". The full list of Web sites evaluated is provided in the study. This fundamental study, conducted by experts in complementary medicine from the universities of Exeter and Plymouth, should raise patients' awareness on the variability of the quality of web sites on CAM for specific diseases.

1. http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters_healthcare.asp, Volume 5, Issue 8-July 28, 2005

2. http://www.clickz.com/stats/sectors/geographics/article.php/151151

3. http://www.ejic.org/page2.html, D, F, UK, E, B, A, CH/

4. http://annonc.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/15/5/733

Health Information You Can TRUST: HONcode Toolbar

The HONcode Toolbar: easy access to trustworthy information.
HON has developed the HON Toolbar. This HON service allows easy searching for HON-certified sites about any medical or health subject, within the "HON confidence-space", and automatically verifies the HONcode compliance of the site.

Sample of certified Website
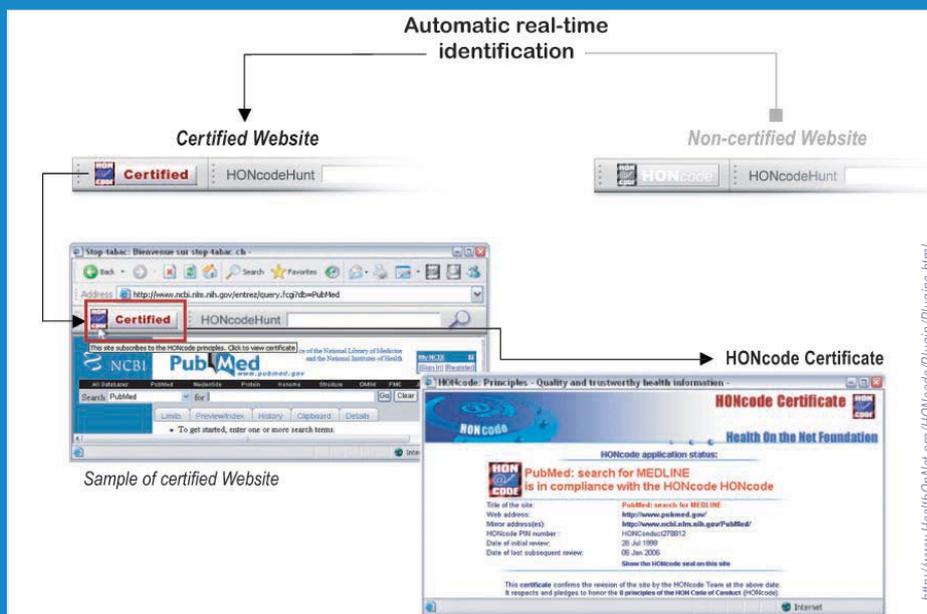
The HON toolbar is a free service supported by the Canton of Geneva, Swiss Government and the European Union.

http://www.HealthOnNet.org/HONcode/Plugin/Plugins.html