



Personalized online information is key to effective healthcare decisions say experts at Bethesda workshop on the quality of health information on the Internet

Bethesda, Maryland (November 12, 2007): At a one-day interactive workshop held by Health Improvement Institute, experts concluded that personalized online information is key to effective healthcare decisions, and that consumers must be engaged in the process of developing such websites. The 2007 event follows up the Institute's groundbreaking 1997 workshop on the "Quality of Health Information on the Internet - telling Fact from Fraud." In the last 10 years, we've seen an explosion of health websites, from about 10,000 to perhaps as many as one million," said Dr. Peter Goldschmidt, President & Founder of the Health Improvement Institute, "As many as 160 million Americans seek health information online. The problems they face today in assessing the quality of online health information are more or less the same as they were 10 years ago."

Consumers are increasingly turning to the Internet for health information, even though such information is often incomplete or inaccurate. Workshop participants recommended that consumers continue seeking information from trusted sources, such as their doctors. "Message boards have the worst information," said Dr. Kate Christensen, a Medical Director with Kaiser Permanente. "Wikis at least have the advantage that they are constantly edited." In the years ahead, we can expect to see more consumer-generated content, interactive support groups, and social networking sites.

Workshop participants agreed that health websites need to identify themselves with company information and make efforts to protect consumer privacy in order to create trust. Donald W. Kemper, Chairman & CEO of Healthwise, said "developing trust in online health information is similar to developing trust in doctors. Only after getting good results from the first few visits, do patients start building trust." But, to start, patients know that doctors are licensed and can check on qualifications, and, as transparency initiatives gather momentum, actual performance. A key challenge will be integrating provider treatment and web-based information to provide patients with a seamless health care experience.

"Consumers are increasingly turning to social networking, search engines and community sites for health information," said Beau Brendler, Director of Consumer Reports WebWatch. "It's important they know where the best sources are for definitive information, where they won't be bombarded by industry propaganda masquerading a 'patient education'." Trustmarks aren't necessarily trustworthy. "Consumers should be able to click on a trustmark symbol and be taken to a page that lists the requirements for earning that certification," said Jorgen Wouters, senior Web producer at Consumer Reports WebWatch. But, he added, "sometimes the links are dead, the ratings are outdated or the information is not helpful."

About 50 healthcare practitioners, researchers, web publishers, and other experts from across the county attended the workshop. Sponsors included Consumers Union and Consumer Reports Webwatch. A workshop report summarizes participants' findings and recommendations for improving the quality of health information on the Internet.



About the Health Improvement Institute:

Health Improvement Institute (<http://www.hii.org>) is a non-profit, tax exempt, 501(c)3, charitable organization dedicated to improving the quality and productivity of America's health care. The Institute's principal program objective is to provide information to enable people to make informed health care choices. The Institute has established expertise in evaluating the quality of health information on the Internet, conducts forums and workshops, and sponsors national awards programs to recognize excellence, including the Aesculapius Award for excellence in health communication. The Institute produced independent ratings of health-related websites in partnership with Consumer Reports WebWatch.

About Consumer Reports WebWatch:

Consumer Reports WebWatch (<http://www.consumerwebwatch.org>) serves as a daily resource of unbiased and trustworthy information, using the proven methods of Consumer Reports and other independently derived research methods. The WebWatch research agenda includes health, financial services, news and information sites, children's sites and general issues of concern to consumers on the Web, such as privacy, spyware and information security. Consumer Reports WebWatch at Consumers Union, the non-profit publisher of Consumer Reports magazine and ConsumerReports.org, acknowledges support of The Pew Charitable Trusts, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the Open Society Institute as instrumental to its founding and first five years of success. WebWatch's investigative reports, articles and news are available to the general public at ConsumerWebWatch.org. WebWatch accepts no advertising or corporate support whatsoever. WebWatch serves as a special unpaid adviser to the StopBadware.org project of The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School and the Oxford Internet Institute. WebWatch director Beau Brendler is a member of the At-Large Advisory Committee to the Internet Corporation for Assigning Names and Numbers (ICANN).