Internet use and eHealth literacy levels among patients attending a hospital based primary care clinic in Malaysia

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Background: With the increased in Internet penetration all over the world, more and more patient information materials are presented on the digital platform. Digital patient information materials have distinct advantages over the printed materials by being readily available, easily accessible and editable, and need very little cost for production. However, it is unclear if our patients have adequate e health literacy skills to seek, understand and use these digital materials.

Objectives: This study aims to determine the distribution of and identify factors associated with e-health literacy skills in primary care patients attending a hospital based primary care clinic in Malaysia.

Method: This cross-sectional study was conducted in between November to December 2015 among 200/210 (response rate: 95.2%) primary care patients in Kuala Lumpur. Inclusion criteria were patients age 18 and above, able to understand Bahasa Malaysia or English, respondents may be a regular patient or first timer to the clinic. Patients who are too ill or unable to complete the questionnaire due to health reasons such as active mental health were excluded. A questionnaire on demographic of respondents, Internet use and 8 item e-health literacy questions was used. Descriptive analyses were performed.

Results: The mean age of the patients was 51.9 ± 17 with 50.5% male patients. The prevalence of Internet use was 68%, of this 52.5% was current users and 15.5% was previous users. The mean eHEALS score was 19.46 (possible range 8 to 32).The domains that scored poorly were 'I have the skills I need to evaluate the health resources I find on the Internet' (mean score 2.28 ± 0.92), 'I can tell high quality from low quality health resources on the Internet' (mean score 2.22± 0.9) and 'I feel confident in using information from the Internet to make health decisions' (mean score 2.36± 0.95).

Conclusion: This study found the prevalence of Internet use amongst primary care patients is high but the ehealth literacy skill is still poor. Most patients were unable to determine the quality of information they read on the Internet and this influence their confidence in using information obtained from the internet to make health decisions.

Keywords: Internet use, ehealth literacy, eheals, primary care.