Evaluating Health Web Sites

Additional tools for evaluating web sites are available on the NUR 2100 / NUR 2400 Course Guide.

Questions to Consider When Evaluating Sources

Your professors expect nursing students to use sources written for health care professionals, not patients. Here are some tips to help you decide whether your chosen source is both credible and appropriate.

Consider the following questions:

1. **Who is the intended audience of this site? Is it patients? Health care professionals? Both?**

   If the site is for patients only DO NOT use it. There is no need to evaluate it further because it is not appropriate for this class, even if the content is credible. Look for another site.

   Sites written for patients often have:

   - Recognizable “brand names” advertised to general public on TV, in magazines, and on other internet sites. e.g: WebMD
   - Disclaimers that the site is for “informational purposes only” and does not constitute medical advice or is not a substitute for seeing a physician or healthcare provider, e.g. WebMD, medlineplus.gov

Some sites include sections intended for patients and other sections or pages intended for health care professionals. If the site has both kinds of sections, be sure to use the health professionals sections only – but only if the site is appropriate based on all the other evaluation criteria described below.

Sites that include both information for patients and professionals will often have headings such as “For Consumers” /“For Patients” and other headings like “For Health Professionals”/”For Clinicians”/”For Researchers”.

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Examples of reliable site that contain information for the general public/patients as well as health professionals:

- World Health Organization’s Publications [who.int/publications/en/]
- Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality: [ahrq.gov]
- American Diabetes Association [diabetes.org] (Most of the information is clearly intended for patients living with diabetes, but one section of the site is for professionals – diabetes educators and clinicians).

2. Who is the entity responsible for creating or sponsoring the information?

- Is it an R.N., M.D., pharmacist, a professional organization for nurses or physicians, a pharmaceutical company, a person with no healthcare background?

- Is it even possible to determine who compiled or created the content and what their qualifications are?

If you cannot verify who the creator or compiler is or if that person or group is qualified to provide that kind of information, do not use the site. Sometimes the “About Us” section may be purposely misleading so if you are not familiar with the organization or entity responsible, do a search to find out what others are saying about them.

3. What is the ultimate purpose of the site? Is it to inform or is it to sell an idea or product?

Information about a disease or condition is sometimes provided by a pharmaceutical company. As indicated above, it may not always even be clear what the sources or the information is. It does not mean that the information is wrong or intentionally misleading, but if the information provider has a vested interested in selling a product or idea, it makes sense to be skeptical and try to corroborate the information and/or use another source that seems to have less potential for bias.

4. Is the information on the site based on verifiable clinical evidence?

A site may read well and look professional, but can you trace the information presented there to reliable sources? Can you go to a well-known, respected health professional site (e.g. AHRQ, NIH, or specialty-specific professional web site) or other authoritative health source and find the same information reported there?

- Does the site mention any sources that back up its claims?
- If so, can you verify that those sources actually exist and are reputable?

5. Has the site been updated recently?

Current information is often important for health care topics.

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