The Impact of Health Information Digitization on the Physiotherapist-Patient Relationship: A Pilot Study of the Lebanese Community

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ABSTRACT

The healthcare field presents a high interest for patients who surf the net for pathology definitions, symptoms, treatments and medications mostly before visiting a health practitioner. No matter the quantity of information found on the internet, the quality and credibility of this information is sometimes questionable. It is the first of its kind in the physiotherapy field in general and in Lebanon specifically, aiming to explore the impact of the medical information research on the internet and how it affects the PT-patient relationship, adopting a positivist and deductive approach, based on similar studies conducted in the context of other health care specialties. For this article, the authors sent a questionnaire-based survey that was computerized and analyzed using SPSS program. For H1, 32% of the variation in the PT-patient relationship was caused by seeking health information on the internet, and in H2: 27.2% of the variation in the acceptance of the physiotherapist’s medical plan was caused by seeking health information on the internet.

KEYWORDS

Digitization, Health Information on the Internet, Order of Physiotherapist in Lebanon, Physical Therapy, Physiotherapists-Patient Relationship, Physiotherapy

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the rapid evolution of the Internet and the emergence of various innovative forms of social media such as YouTube, online Portals and web-based Communities as well as social communication networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter have seen massive amount of information being quickly disseminated to individuals worldwide; importantly, access to such media information has also been largely free of charge (De Oliveira, 2014).

Today, healthcare Internet-based content is proliferating on publicly available websites that are also conveniently accessible via WIFI-enabled laptop computers, powerful tablets and/or smart phones engineered with user-friendly interfaces (Agius & Stangeland, 2016). In turn, this widespread accessibility has made the search for specific health information applicable to different patients seeking

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to understand their particular health condition very efficient, thereby enabling information seekers to learn from other patients’ experiences with similar ailments and to identify alternative treatments when, where and if available (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Notwithstanding the countless amount of Health information digitization, somehow, the occasional questionable credibility of this information may lead to increased risk of having undesired health outcomes, for example, patients requesting for inappropriate and unnecessary clinical interventions (Rod, 2016). This abundance of information, free of basic medical knowledge, also makes patients question the need to see a medical expert and further encourages them to become self-care practitioners (De Oliveira, 2014). Accordingly, this calls for an urgent need to validate the quality of information that is accessible online prior to adopting it (Conrad, Bandini & Vasquez, 2015). On the one hand, whatever patients find on the Internet may help to educate them to be more knowledgeable, competent, and further empower them in intelligent shared health decision-making, reducing embarrassment and time constraints when visiting with an expert clinician (Rod, 2016); on the other hand, trained physicians and other care professionals are becoming increasingly wary of patients getting inaccurate, inadequate, or misleading online information, which may eventually lead to ineffective or dangerous self-treatment choices by patients, especially those influenced by false and/or misleading advertisements (De Oliveira, 2014).

This research attempts to examine the effect of seeking a priori health related information by patients over the Internet on the physiotherapist-patient (PT-patient) relationship, specifically on how the online medical information can affect the PT-patient relationship and the patients’ acceptance of the physiotherapist’s medical approach. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, the background motivating this research is discussed, with its significance broadly highlighted. Next, the methods employed in the current pilot are detailed. Following this, the specific questionnaire instrument used for gathering the pilot data is presented with details and comments on the sample population and response rate. Data analysis and results of the study are then unveiled, followed by a general discussion of the study limitations as well as reviews about the study findings vis-à-vis the larger context of the extant literature. Finally, the paper closes with some thoughts of how the current work may be extended to support potential future research in similar areas.

BACKGROUND

In April 2001, an order of physiotherapists in Lebanon (OPTL) was established to organize the profession of physiotherapy in Lebanon, thereby preserving the legal and legitimate rights of the physical therapists (PTs) who are allowed to exercise their profession on and across the Lebanese Territory only by being OPTL members and abiding by its by-laws (OPTL, 2016).

As defined by The World Confederation of Physical therapy (WCPT), with the collaboration of the World Health Organization (WHO), physical therapy (PT), is a medical “science-based profession” responsible for maximizing a person’s quality-of-life (QoL). This QoL maximization is generally achieved through the effort of the PTs to “…develop, maintain and restore maximum movement and functional ability (of patients) throughout the lifespan…” (WCPT, description of Physical Therapy, p. 1). Put simply, PTs are professionally qualified care providers who typically formulate a diagnosis and/or prognosis, plan and implement a rehabilitation treatment program to ensure the restoration and maintenance of the normal functional and/or healthy abilities typically needed throughout a patient’s life (WCPT, 2016).

The International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) code 2264 indicates that “…physiotherapists assess, plan and implement rehabilitative programs that improve or restore human motor functions, maximize movement ability, receive pain syndromes and treat or prevent physical challenges associated with injuries and diseases…” (ISCO, 2016). In maximizing the resulting value
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