Some online health information and services have the potential to mislead, confuse or create unnecessary anxiety and more should be done to help people find trustworthy health websites and use online health services safely and effectively, says a new report on the ethics of ‘personalised healthcare’ (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2010).

In September 2008, the UK Nuffield Council on Bioethics established a Working Party to consider the ethical issues raised by developments in medical profiling and online medicine that promise more ‘personalised healthcare’. The resulting report, published in October 2010, makes a number of policy and practice recommendations for providers and users of e-health services. This article highlights the recommendations made in three of the report’s e-health case studies: online health information, online personal health records, and telemedicine.

Many of the ethical questions and challenges around these developments concern their interaction with two key social pressures, which the Working Party termed ‘responsibilisation’ and ‘consumerisation’. The idea of ‘responsibilisation’ emerges when we consider that people are now actively encouraged to take more responsibility for their own health, to lead a healthy lifestyle and play an active role in managing their healthcare. E-health and telemedicine provide a range of tools to enable people to take more responsibility for their health, often within their own home. When thinking about ‘consumerisation’, there is nothing new about being able to select and pay for healthcare in the private sector, but today even public healthcare services are aiming to become more user focused. A consumerist approach to healthcare and the new technologies available is helping to drive the market for many online medical services.

Five ethical values were considered to be important when considering developments in online medicine. These were:

- Private information should be safeguarded.
- Individuals should be able to pursue their own interests in their own way.
- The state should act to reduce harm.
- Public resources should be used fairly and efficiently.

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