Chapter 48
Quality of Health Web Sites:
Dimensions for a Broad Evaluation Methodology

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ABSTRACT

The use of a methodology for the evaluation, comparison, and quality improvement of Health Web Sites is justified by its widespread adoption and visibility to Internet users. Due to the sensitiveness of their content and impact on users, health related sites should be evaluated. This chapter proposes three different dimensions for the development of quality evaluation methodologies of Health Web Sites: contents, services, and technical. The authors consider that these dimensions should be addressed transversally, providing an integrated and better overall evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

As citizens we are integrated in a global market that includes Web services and contents. We are currently in a “Global Era,” the era of Knowledge and Information Society. Most of us have a fast access to these services and contents, mostly at the distance of a click.

Beyond the availability of contents, the technology development allows people to make medical appointments, exams, and treatments or simply look for support and advices from health care professionals online, at any time of the day, any day and anywhere. This reality allows health care institutions to provide new and innovative services to their patients.

The exponential growth of the Internet gave place to a widespread search for contents and online services, including those concerning health issues. This search is reflected on the fact that most Internet users access the Internet for health issues questions (Manhattan Research, 2009; Eurostat, 2008; Andreassen et al., 2007; Fox, 2006), demanding a vast number of related Web Sites (Yellowlees, 2008).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-3990-4.ch048
Quality of Health Web Sites

Although Web Sites Quality is a pertinent question in every business area, the sensitiveness, sensibility and importance associated with the health care area justify an attentive observation of this subject (Lorence and Abraham, 2008).

In the present chapter, the Health Care Web Sites and their importance are approached, as a starting point to the development of a wide methodology. The evaluation, comparison and improvement of the Health care institutions’ Web Sites is transversal to the main quality dimensions: Contents, Services and Technical.

Thus, in the following sections we describe Health care Web Sites, identifying their different categories. We present statistics concerning their existence and search, discussing their importance and need for satisfying quality requisites. Finally, we propose a high-level structure for a global quality evaluation of a Web Site.

HEALTH WEB SITES

Web Site Definition

According to the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) a Web Site is a “set of connected Web pages, including a main page, located in the same net. Pages are accessed following a sequence, starting on a main page and ending on the wanted page” (Lavoie and Nielsen, 1999).

We can then define Web Site as electronic pages that contain connections, images and objects, with a code interpreted by a browser. Meaning, it is a set of contents and services remotely accessible through an HTTP communication protocol, composed by HTML static and/or dynamic pages and other multimedia elements. This is what makes a World Wide Web (WWW).

Health Web Site Definition

A Heath Web Site is an Internet location that allows the access to contents and services related to Health. Examples of this are education and health prevention, as well as booking management for health services and health acts payments.

One of the main questions from health and healthcare Websites concerns their services and contents quality guarantee (Lorence and Abraham, 2008).

Health Web Sites Categories

Health Web Sites have distinctive focus, domain, destinations, objectives and functionalities. This fact suggests the search for the establishment of Health Web Sites’ categories, but literature is poor in this subject. The literature presents the two founded classifications.

In the first classification, Giacomo and Maceratini (2002) frame Health Web Sites in four categories:

- **Health Portal**: Web Site with online services and/or pharmacies.
- **Documental Site and Meta-Site**: Web Site with connections and/or references to other sites.
- **Health Professionals and Citizens Site**: Mainly concerning specific diseases. Examples can be found in Medscape and Medconsul.
- **Doctors’ Personal Sites**: Medical Doctors’ Web Sites including information concerning addresses and schedules, specialization, appointments proceedings, email, etc.

The second classification provides a wider categorization from the Health Improvement Institute (2006). It classifies Health Web Sites in two detail levels, being the higher level composed by seven categories:

- **Communication Web Site**: In order to communicate health contents to consumers, health professionals, or other specific individual groups, including:
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