

Book review

The patient's internet handbook

Robert Kiley and Elizabeth Graham,
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In the introduction to this book the authors quote a paediatrician writing in the *British Medical Journal* in 1996: 'Only serious computer enthusiasts with plenty of spare time should access the Internet from home'. Even at the time this must have seemed a serious under-estimation of the potential of the Internet to transform many aspects of society—including health care. When *The Patient's Internet Handbook* was written 37% of households in the United Kingdom were connected to the Internet. Latest figures suggest that over half of all UK homes are now online with further access available through the workplace, education etc. We can now say that the majority of the population are now Internet users.

By 2000 the UK's ten-year health strategy, *The NHS Plan*, was recognising that 'patients need help to navigate the maze of health information'. This handbook is by far the most useful and comprehensive navigation guide in print form. It begins with an introduction to the Internet, how to connect and how to use web browser and email facilities. Although commendably comprehensive, this feels rather rudimentary for the type of reader likely to be using the book. It also shows its age very quickly, in particular the costs of broadband connection, which have come down significantly

in the past year or so. It then follows with guidance on searching for information. A range of search engines are covered (although nowadays many users would simply click on Google). The chapter on medical databases is particularly valuable, demystifying for patients major 'professional' resources including Medline, Cochrane Database, and Complementary and Alternative Medicine Citation Index. Section 3 on 'Your health and the Internet' includes how to find out information about health services, hospitals etc. There has been considerable improvement in this area over the past year and the next edition of the book will need to include the availability of hospital reviews and star ratings at www.chi.nhs.uk (Commission for Health Improvement). Further sections cover medicines, complementary and alternative medicine, and pregnancy and childbirth. The book concludes with an exhaustive list of resources for 100 medical conditions from acne to varicose veins.

The rapid development of the Internet as a ubiquitous health information resource is both the reason why we need the *Patient's Internet Handbook* and why it is already out of date. The authors have recognised this by setting up a Patient's Internet Handbook website at www.patient-handbook.co.uk from where links referenced in the book are kept up to date. Visit the site—and look out for the next edition.

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