

## Candidate H evidence

### Cyberchondria

Bit of a sore head: probably migraine, cluster headache, brain tumour, CJD... Pain in your arm: could be tennis elbow, arthritis, bone cancer... Having a bit of a down day: anxiety, seasonal affected disorder, depression... Worried that you are not feeling 100%, then hop online and research every symptom (real or imagined), scroll through every possible, however improbable, diagnosis until you spiral down the rabbit hole of common, rare and frantically ludicrous diseases that you might be suffering from. Unwind yourself from the stress ball that you are curled up in and confront the real diagnosis - you are a cyberchondriac.

“Hypochondria is the only illness I don’t have,” We all know someone who is a hypochondriac, convinced every sniffle will lead to their untimely demise, but now they are armed with research, facts, data, global information that assures them that the slightest cough is no longer the common cold, but in fact Von Hippel-Lindau Disease, Paraneoplastic Pemphigus, or Alice in Wonderland syndrome - all real diseases, but so incredibly rare you would have a much higher chance of winning the lottery than contracting them. However, much as we may mock those whose reliance on cybernetic diagnosis affects their behaviour, many health professionals are worried about the negative effects on both the individuals involved and the UK health care system in general.

Researchers from Imperial College London say that one in five appointments are now taken up by people with irrational fears fuelled by researching the internet and this is wasting £420 million of the NHS’s scarce resources every year. The 2006 Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that 80% of American internet users have searched for health-related information online. This translates to about 113 million American adults. Most of these people started their search on a web search engine, such as Google or Yahoo and only 15% of them checked that their sources were reliable or backed up by evidence.

However, before this becomes another Luddite condemnation of the internet, it must be acknowledged that having access to information from reliable sources is beneficial. Surely it is better to be well-informed than rely on rumour, heresy and old wives’ tales? With the average doctor patient consultation time being eight minutes, it is understandable that many

people may feel that they can gain a more accurate and informative diagnosis by spending a length of time on the web. There is also the impression that the internet contains the wisdom of a large number of health professionals and specialists whereas your doctor is a general practitioner and may not have the expertise that you need. The website NHS Inform, for example has an A to Z list of symptoms and self-help guide which can reassure the patient that they have a cold, that can be treated with over the counter remedies, reducing the need for a call to the NHS helpline or making a doctor's appointment. We are all well aware of the crisis affecting the NHS and anything that can decrease unnecessary appointments must be beneficial to the system as a whole. Not only is this true of physical ailments, but there are also diagnostic tools to help patients with mental health issues. The NHS has a self-assessment tool for people who feel they may be depressed and the mental health charity MIND also has information about symptoms and treatment.

But, like everything connected to the internet, online diagnostic tools must be used cautiously and cannot replace an interview with a health professional. Our bodies are complex organisms that do not always work perfectly, we suffer from aches and pains, we get tired and out of sorts: this doesn't always mean that we have to put a name to our ache, pain or lethargy, we might just have to get more sleep, eat healthier, get fitter. Our lives too are complex, often stressful and emotional, we get anxious, we get sad, we get frustrated, we get overwhelmed. This doesn't mean that we have to medicalise perfectly legitimate feelings. We might just have to take a break, ask for support, get some fresh air or maybe even alter the way we live our lives. No one is seeking to belittle people with mental health issues, but perhaps we are all starting to believe that we are all supposed to feel 100% happy and well 100% of the time and if we don't then we have a diagnosable problem.

The issue with using the internet to categorise our symptoms is that it will give equal weighting to both common and extremely rare illnesses. Two scientists who research for Microsoft, Eric Horvitz and Ryen White, carried out an analysis of online diagnostic sites, finding that a web search for "headache" caused information about brain tumours to come up 25% of the time, even though only 0.002% of the population will develop a brain tumour. They had the same concerns with other searches, for example a web search for 'twitching' brought up a 'significantly high' proportion of documents about Motor Neurone Disease

when it only affects 0.007 % of the population. We believe that the more information there is about a disease, the more likely it is to affect us and we are basically too lazy, or too panicked to delve deeper and question the validity of the website or look for more mundane and less life threatening alternative causes of our symptoms. It is way more likely that our headache is due to stress, too much alcohol, caffeine withdrawal, dehydration, bad posture or eye strain. It is far more probable that our twitching is caused by stress, dehydration or too much caffeine. Put down that third Americano.

There is another, possibly more serious problem with online diagnosis being that errors can be made. The patient has a number of symptoms, they use an online diagnostic tool, they are reassured that there is nothing wrong and thus don't visit their doctor and a serious, potentially life threatening illness is missed. Doctors are only human and make human errors, but, hopefully they are educated and experienced enough to be able to diagnose most illnesses at a consultation. And doctors have something it is unlikely that the internet will ever have: instinct, that gut feeling that persuades them to carry out further tests.

For good or ill, in today's society the replacement of the humble human with a highly technological machine is on the rise, but in the medical field we should only accept the technological advances that *support* the human health professionals. Doctors cannot be replaced by computers, however many thousands or millions of hits a web search for symptoms produces. There is a simple solution to cyberchondria - stop people self-diagnosing on the internet altogether. However, this blunt edged and knee jerk reaction is probably not advisable, even if it were possible. The internet gives ordinary people access to in-depth and well researched health advice. The more sophisticated answer to the concerns expressed is to guide people to the best, most trustworthy sites to access their information, sites which adhere to a code of conduct. We need to master the use of the internet in health care rather than become enslaved by it.

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