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Survey

Quality of Pharma-sponsored Health Information on the Internet

by John Mack, VirSci Corporation.

In 2002, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) adopted a new marketing code to govern the pharmaceutical industry's relationships with physicians and other healthcare professionals. With all the bad press recently about marketing directly to consumers and privacy concerns, perhaps it is time for the pharmaceutical industry to self-regulate marketing to consumers as well, especially via the Internet.

There are a number of codes out there – including the eHealth Code of Ethics of the Internet Healthcare Coalition, which I am involved with – that could be adopted by the industry for this purpose. However, what is the attitude of pharmaceutical professionals regarding the quality of pharma-sponsored health information on the Net? Does the industry perceive a problem in this area?

To help answer this question, a survey – *Quality of Pharma-Sponsored Health Information on the Internet* – was sponsored by the Internet Healthcare Coalition in conjunction with the Pharma Marketing Network (PMN) and was hosted by PollingPharma on their web site (www.pollingpharma.com) during the month of January, 2003. PollingPharma provides an opportunity to collect opinions of individuals working within the global pharmaceutical industry. Members of PMN were invited to participate. Some results of the survey are presented and analyzed in the following article.

Since PollingPharma has a large base of registered users in the EU and especially the UK, I thought it would be interesting to compare results from US and UK survey respondents. In the UK it is not legal for pharmaceutical companies to target disease or Rx information to consumers, whereas in the US this is allowed. So we are looking at a group with little DTC exposure (UK) versus a group with abundant DTC exposure (US). Are there any enlightening differences of opinion between the two groups? Read on and see.

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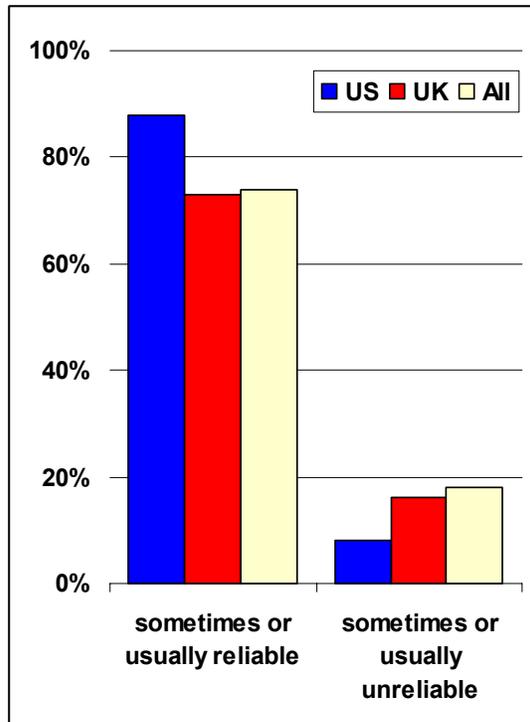


FIG 1: General Quality of Pharma-Sponsored Health Information on the Internet

Approximately 23% (N=53) of the 228 survey respondents are from the U.S., 88% of whom believe pharma-sponsored health information on the Net is sometimes or usually reliable. This is compared to 73% of UK respondents who believe this.

While 8% of US respondents believe pharma-sponsored health information on the Net is sometimes or usually un-reliable, 16% of UK respondents (N=116 or 51% of total respondents) believe this.

Among respondents who work at companies or organizations that provide such content to the general public, 76% believe it is sometimes or usually reliable, whereas only 64% of those who do not work for such companies believe so.

It appears that familiarity with DTC does NOT breed contempt! As shown in FIG 1, US respondents had a significantly higher opinion of pharma-sponsored health information on the Net than did UK respondents. Also, significantly more respondents who work in companies or organizations that provide such information gave higher ratings than those who did not work in such companies (76% vs. 64%, respectively).

The eHealth Code of Ethics of the Internet Healthcare Coalition includes a number of principles that can be used to assess the quality of health Web sites. How important are these quality measures to the industry? FIG 2 shows a synopsis of these results, again comparing US to UK responses.

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eFact or eFiction?

Nearly two thirds of patients who seek medical information online rate the quality of the information they find “excellent” or “very good.” However, more than half do not discuss the information with a physician.

See page 6 for answer.

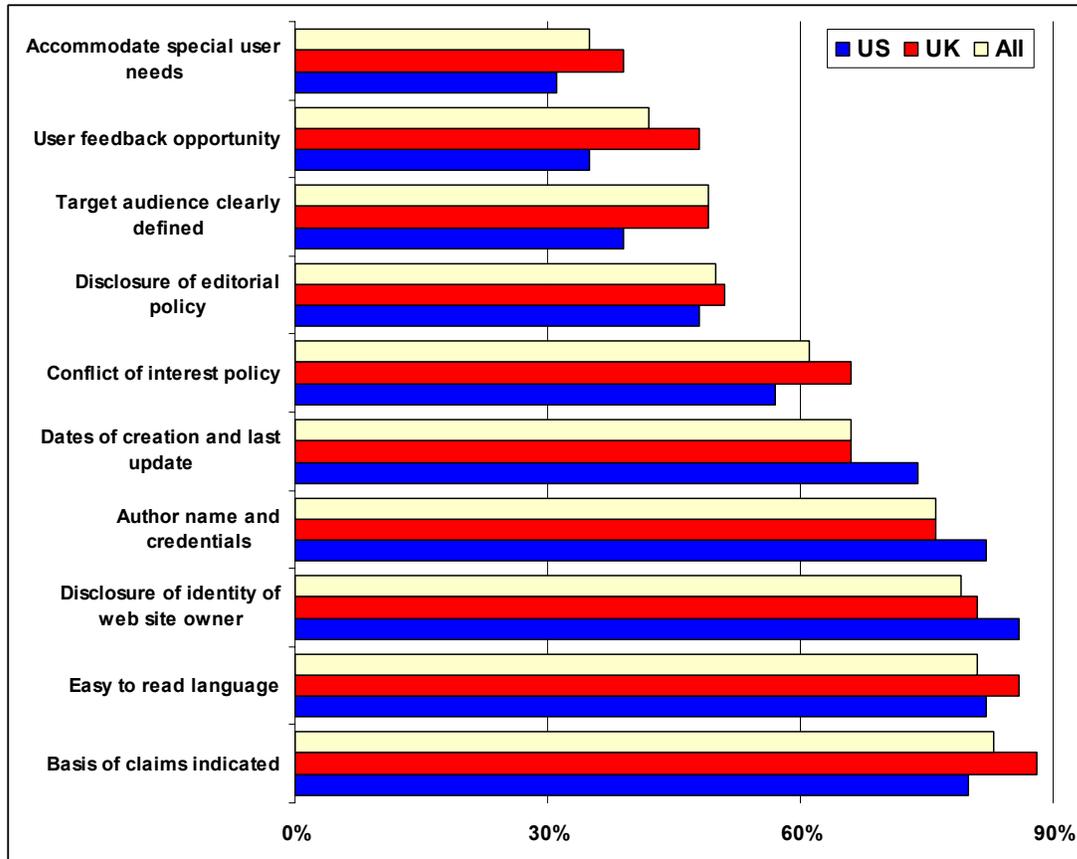


FIG 2: Principles for Assessing the Quality of Specific Examples of Pharma-Sponsored Health Information on the Internet

Bars represent percent of respondents giving the principle the highest rating (5 or 6 on a scale of 1 to 6).

In FIG 2, the results are sorted from overall lowest ranking (top) to overall highest ranking (bottom) for these principles. While UK respondents ranked “Basis of claims indicated” highest, US respondents thought “disclosure of identity of site owner” and author credentials were more important. The “basis” principle states: “Site indicates clearly whether information is based on scientific studies, expert consensus, or professional or personal experience or opinion.”

Some other differences: US respondents seem less inclined to offer customer support tools or accommodate special needs of users (e.g., vision impaired users). For example, 48% of UK respondents rated “opportunity to feedback user comments” a 5 or 6 (highest ratings), whereas only 39% of US respondents rated it this high.

The vast majority of respondents did not feel that the increase in availability of health information on the Net has, overall, caused more confusion among the public than helped to inform them. Only 11% of US respondents agreed with that statement, whereas 25% of UK respondents said it was true (see FIG 3).

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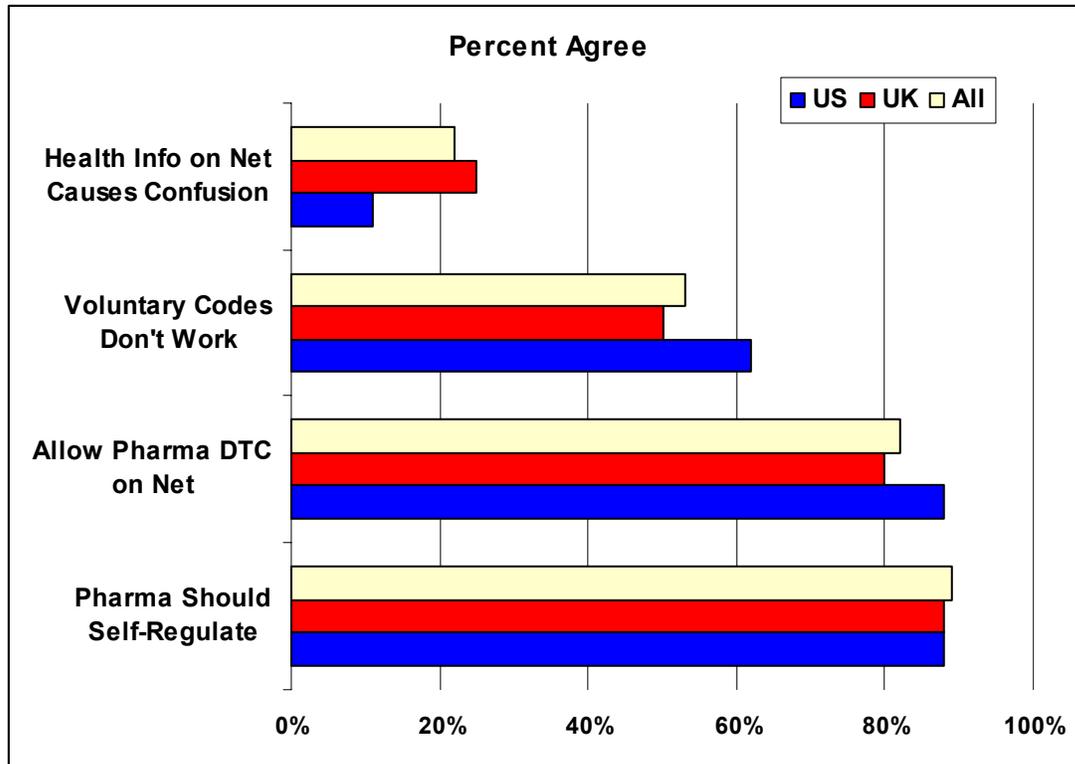


FIG 3: What Should Pharma Do?

The majority of respondents overall (53%) agreed that voluntary codes of conduct only cause more work for the well intentioned and don't prevent the less virtuous doing their own thing regardless. US respondents were most adamant about this, with 62% in agreement. An even greater majority of respondents (82%) agreed that pharmaceutical companies should be allowed to freely provide health information relevant to their drugs direct to the public on the Internet. Not surprisingly, proportionately more US respondents felt this way than did UK respondents (88% vs, 80%).

What's Good for the Goose is Also Good for the Gander?

Nearly 90% of respondents – from both sides of the pond – felt that pharma companies should develop and follow self-regulatory ethical guidelines for providing consumer-focused health information on the Net similar to the PhRMA marketing code governing relationships with physicians (see FIG 3).

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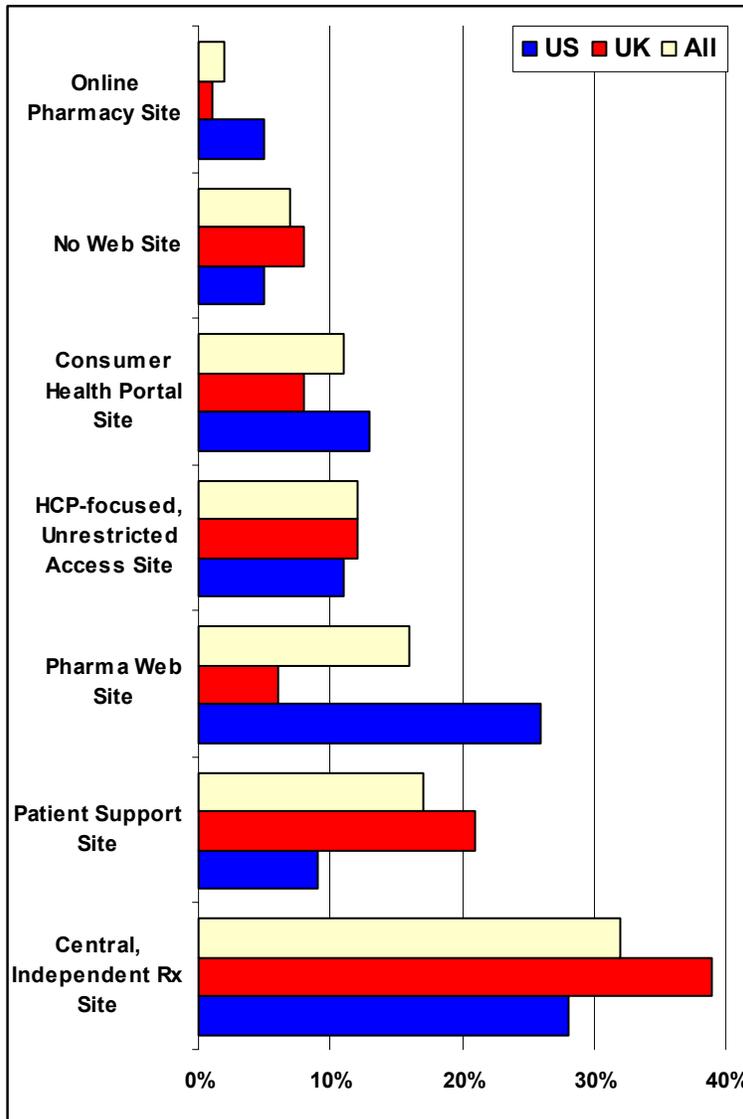


FIG 4: Where Would You Advise Your Family to Go First for Information About a Prescription Drug They Are About to Use?

It's all well and good to speak theoretically, but where would you recommend your loved ones to go to find more information about Rx drugs on the Internet, if at all?

Significantly more US vs. UK respondents recommended the pharma site (26% vs. 6%, respectively). On the other hand, 39% of UK respondents vs. 28% of US respondents would recommend a central, independent Rx site.

These results are not surprising, considering that Pharma Rx sites are not allowed in the UK and although UK citizens can visit US sites, the brand names, indications, and dosages may be different than the UK equivalents. It is wise, therefore, not to send UK citizens to pharma sites, lest they get inappropriate information.

Many more UK respondents would also recommend patient support sites than would their US counterparts (21% vs. 9%, respectively). Is it possible that patient support sites in the UK assume a much more important role in patient education and compliance because of the vacuum formed by a lack of reliable online information direct from the manufacturer?

This survey is by no means scientific, but it does offer some tantalizing insights that may be worthy of a more careful assessment. I thank PollingPharma and Peter Llewellyn, Managing Director, for helping develop this survey and providing financial support for incentives. The views expressed here, however, are my own. You can view the complete survey results and do some analysis of your own by visiting www.pollingpharma.com and clicking on "Previous Surveys."

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<mailto:johnmack@virsci.com>**eFact or eFiction?**

Nearly two thirds of patients who seek medical information online rate the quality of the information they find "excellent" or "very good." However, more than half do not discuss the information with a physician.

TRUE

Researchers who mailed a survey to randomly selected patients of a primary care practice found that 54% of respondents said they used the Internet to search for medical information, but 59% of those said they did not discuss the information with a physician. About the same number, 60%, said the information they found online was "the same as" or "better than" information they received from physicians. Overall, 62% of those who sought medical information online rated the quality of the information "excellent" or "very good," while 32% said it was "good," 6% said it was "fair" and none rated it "poor."

Source: *Journal of General Internal Medicine* (Diaz et al. March 2002).