

## Concern over Google links to worrying medical claims

March 19 2009

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Google needs better control of its advertisements and suggested links to avoid web pages that contain worrying medical claims, warn doctors in an article published on [bmj.com](http://bmj.com) today.

Dr Marco Masoni and colleagues at the University of Florence in Italy suggest that, as the internet is not well policed and regulated, it is up to members of the [medical community](#) to be vigilant and to suggest improvements.

They recently used [Google](#) Italia to search on the keyword "aloe" and found sponsored links to websites recommending aloe arborescens for the prevention and treatment of cancer and offering it for sale.

[AdWords](#) is "Google's flagship advertising product" and was its "main source of revenue in 2007." Through it, users can create advertisements, choose their own key words, and decide which Google queries their advertisements should match. Google decides on placement on its pages of search results: which advertisements to show and in what order.

But Google's automated matching to search terms sometimes places inappropriate advertisements. For example Google Guide (which is neither affiliated with nor endorsed by Google), says: "In September of 2003, adjacent to a New York Post article about a gruesome murder in which the victim's body parts were stashed in a suitcase, Google listed an ad for suitcases. Since that incident, Google has improved its filters and automatically pulls ads from pages with disturbing content."

But the authors argue that Google filters must be improved further.

Google has often said that it wishes to enter the healthcare arena in many ways, say the authors. "We think that a necessary first step for Google is to improve its filters and algorithms so as to prevent possible harm to its users," they conclude.

"We are experiencing a healthcare reformation," says Joanne Shaw from NHS Direct in a second article. "The internet has brought the canon of [medical knowledge](#) into the hands and homes of ordinary people, and this should be welcomed and encouraged as good for patients and doctors alike." It is true that the internet may be a further source of alarm for the worried well, but equally it encourages early presentation and action that could improve survival and reduce complications from long term conditions, she writes.

Furthermore, the internet does not diminish the role of doctors but casts them as expert advisers rather than authoritarian figures with exclusive guardianship of special knowledge denied to ordinary people.

Many doctors already act according to those principles, and many patients will continue to want a more traditional style of relationship with their doctors. But people who look to the internet as a legitimate tool to help them with their health may already be in the majority and this is something for us to celebrate, she concludes.

Source: British Medical Journal ([news](#) : [web](#))

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