

Unique software supports behavioural intervention programmes

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The internet offers users a cost-effective way of accessing information and advice on any health problem, 24-hours a day. A group of social scientists has taken advantage of this by developing software which enables other researchers to easily create interactive internet-based intervention programmes to support behavioural change. The software, known as LifeGuide, is being used in intervention programmes, for example to quit smoking or manage weight loss.

LifeGuide is a flexible tool that can be used to give tailored health advice, help users make decisions about life choices, and support them in their efforts to maintain long-term change. It has been developed by scientists at the University of Southampton with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). As a measure of its popularity, in the last two years over 1,000 researchers worldwide have registered to use LifeGuide.

"Interventions designed to influence behaviour are a part of many people's daily life, such as personal advice, support and training from professionals, or general information provided by the media. However, advice and support can be costly and may not always be readily available to everyone," says Professor Lucy Yardley who developed LifeGuide with colleagues. "But, the internet can give access to services offering information and advice on many [health problems](#). Services can also be made interactive and individually tailored, and they can be set up to support people with reminders, feedback, action planning and [chat rooms](#)."

Despite the advantages of working online, until LifeGuide was introduced, researchers had to programme each internet-based behavioural intervention from scratch. Consequently, development costs were high and systems were not easily modified once programmed.

"LifeGuide is a unique tool that enables researchers with no programming background to create interactive internet-based systems to support [behaviour change](#)," Professor Yardley continues. "Researchers don't need to employ special programmers and it can be readily modified to suit many different contexts."

It allows researchers to create and modify two important dimensions of behavioural interventions: providing tailored information and advice; and supporting sustained behaviour. The system also supports evaluation of interventions, such as online questionnaire assessment, and automatic follow-up.

For example, LifeGuide has been used as an application, looking at research on the prescription by doctors of antibiotics. Recently, a public health warning about over-prescription of antibiotics for minor infections was given by England's Chief Medical Officer. It was pointed out that antibiotics are increasingly losing their effectiveness as bacteria adapt and develop resistance.

While the public may feel they need antibiotics to ease infections, doctors have a responsibility to prescribe them only to people with a clear medical need. To ensure more sensible use of antibiotics for respiratory infections, Paul Little, Professor of Primary Care Research in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Southampton and his colleagues have used LifeGuide to develop and tailor online communication training packages for health professionals in six EU countries. Professor Little says, "Using this software in the project made it easy and inexpensive to adapt our training materials for the different

countries we are collaborating with."

More information: www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-149-25-1069/read

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