

# Research reveals advice given on internet health forums may not be as dangerous as often assumed

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New research carried out at Royal Holloway, University of London, suggests that medical advice given on internet health forums may be of better quality than people tend to assume.

The research, entitled 'Health Information from Internet Discussion Forums: How Bad is Dangerous?' is published in the *Journal of Internet Medical Research* paper and focuses on three popular online discussion forum websites - Reddit, Mumsnet and Patient.

The researchers, PhD student Jennifer Cole, Dr Chris Watkins and Dr Dorothea Kleine, from Royal Holloway, asked doctors and members of the public to rate information which had been given in response to questions relating to diabetes, HIV and chickenpox. The results showed that the ratings were mostly favourable, and even where information was considered to be inaccurate, this did not automatically mean that the assessors felt the advice given was bad.

The NHS and many medical charities are still very reluctant to support or enable internet discussion forums where patients are able to discuss medical symptoms or diagnoses. The researchers say there appears to be a perception that such forums will contain inaccurate information or advice that may be harmful to those reading it.

However researcher Jennifer Cole explains: "In reality, forums such as

reddit have very responsible posting policies, verifying the qualifications of posters who claim to be medical professionals, separating medical discussion forums from alternate therapy discussions, swiftly removing incorrect or potentially harmful information and encouraging posters to seek professional healthcare."

Rowan Davies, Head of Policy and Campaigns at Mumsnet, told the researchers that he did not know of a single case where anyone had come to harm because of poor quality information they had read on Mumsnet, and that "inaccurate information is dealt with on-thread by posters themselves, who will usually challenge it and post up alternative points of view. We think it's rare for incorrect or out-of-date information to go unchallenged".

The researchers say a real challenge for their study has been finding enough examples of genuinely [inaccurate information](#).

Jennifer added: "It's important we understand how accurate such discussion platforms are likely to be, and what helps or hinders their accuracy.

With NHS resources under pressure, the number of GP appointments and A&E walk-in admissions increasing, such forums may offer a viable alternative for future healthcare."

**More information:** Jennifer Cole et al. Health Advice from Internet Discussion Forums: How Bad Is Dangerous?, *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.2196/jmir.5051](https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.5051)

Provided by Royal Holloway, University of London

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