ASSESSING THE QUALITY AND RELIABILITY OF INFORMATION ON DRUGS AVAILABLE ON THE INTERNET

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INTRODUCTION. The Internet is an increasingly important source of health-related information for consumers. Among those who use the Internet, more than 70% report the health information they find influences a decision about treatment. However, accessibility and readability of this information is often poor, especially for those with low browsing skills. Aim of our study was to evaluate health information through Italian-language search engines and Web sites, using an hypothetical sample search on side effects and drug interactions of ciclosporin. Secondary goals were to assess the evolution of information on the Net throughout the time of our study (2 years) and to compare the information retrieved with that provided by traditional sources of information. We also drew, according to our experience, a list of links to Web-sites, for patients and health-care professionals, where to find information on drug safety, together with a list of general criteria to apply when evaluating medical-scientific Web sites.

METHODS. We conducted three sample tests using three different query strings (Ciclosporina AND effetti collaterali; Ciclosporina interazioni; Ciclosporina-interazioni), typed on the top five search engines. Inclusion and exclusion criteria have been applied for the Web-sites found. Each search has also been updated twice in different periods of time.

RESULTS. In the first test, we found on average 456 links, 6% of which pertaining to our research. In the second test, links found were on average 268, with 8% complying with our inclusion criteria. Results of the third test were the poorest, compared to the previous ones. Furthermore, comparing indications, side effects, contraindications and interactions of ciclosporin found on the Net with those provided by the SPC, we found 6 indications not mentioned in the SPC. Significant differences were also present in the other fields.

CONCLUSIONS. Our results suggest that, even though Web-based health information is often impressive in terms of quantity, its quality and reliability is poor, especially when using search engines and simple search terms. A medical background and knowledge of English language represents two fundamental requisites to find links of relevant contents.