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## EDITORIAL COMMENT



The Internet is a go-to resource for most Americans. Based on the findings of the Pew Internet Project, looking up health information is the third most common use of the Internet following e-mail and search engine use.<sup>1</sup> While there are many advantages of the Internet as a source of health information, health-related websites may also be misleading or misinterpreted, which can compromise health behaviors and health outcomes, or result in inappropriate requests for clinical interventions, which can reduce time efficiency and strain the physician-patient relationship.<sup>2</sup> This study reported that erroneous information on the oncological efficacy and criteria for treatment of both high intensity focused ultrasound and cryotherapy for the treatment of prostate cancer was prevalent in both academic and private practice websites. What is particularly alarming about these websites is they are assumed to be endorsed by medical professionals and they are thereby relied on as trusted sources of information not only by patients, but also other health care professionals who may not be knowledgeable about the particular subject matter, thus perpetuating further confusion.

Although the motivations of the creators and owners of these websites vary, it is assumed that one reason is to advertise that a practice offers an alternative treatment option for prostate cancer. If one of the primary aims of this type of direct to consumer advertising campaigns is to increase market share and profit rather than enhance well-being,<sup>3</sup> these sites may cause a patient to fail to consider all available treatment options or fail to provide a patient with comprehensive information on potential

adverse effects. Furthermore, this can have implications on value-based care as current health care strategies are interested in treatments that promote the best patient outcomes while driving down costs.

High-quality health care involves core commitments to safety, effectiveness, patient-centeredness, and equity,<sup>4</sup> which are linked to the basic ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice. Another important ethical consideration is the need for disclosing conflicts of interest as the lack thereof can intentionally or unintentionally introduce bias into information disclosed to the public. Providers of online health information should ensure their websites adhere to ethical standards. As health care professionals, we have an ethical obligation to share accurate health information, promptly correct false or misleading health information, and direct people to reliable sources of health information. The National Institutes of Health has compiled some useful questions that can be asked to help assess credibility and accuracy of a website (ie, Who is responsible for the content on the site? Who/What pays for the site? Is there research to support information on the site? When was the material written or compiled?).<sup>5</sup>

Given the large number of health-related websites, the ease with which sites can be created and assessed and the high number of those who rely and trust such information, the medical community needs to come up with ways to further improve the quality of online health information.

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