

Attacking Their HONor*

By Christopher Wanjek

You found a Web site touting a mysterious herbal product guaranteed to cure everything from baldness to jaundice through an eight-week, \$160 regimen grounded in an esoteric California moon cult remotely based on Eastern mysticism. How can you tell if the health information is reliable?

Some calls are easy to make. You can safely assume statements like “tidal forces control hair loss” and “dermatologists don’t want you to know” are suspect. But for those gray areas — such as whether yoga, tai chi or herbal medicines are practical treatments for specific illnesses and conditions — there’s the HONcode, from the Geneva-based Health on the Net Foundation.

Similar codes exist, but the HONcode is the most widely displayed and the oldest, having been created in 1995. The HONcode requires that information providers disclose potential conflicts of interest, provide credentials for authors relaying medical information, and reference the source of the information it presents.

“The HONcode is a way to improve the quality of information” on the Internet, said Celia Boyer, executive director of HON, which is funded by the Geneva Ministry of Health and the European Union. “Given the critical nature of health information and the unregulated environment of the Internet, Web surfers need all the help they can get ... We try to do the best we can.” She gets by with a seven-member team.

The HON site itself provides a search engine for those seeking medical information, and search results are derived only from HON-validated web sites. Search for staples of quackery such as “touch therapy,” “crystal healing” or “yogic flying” via the HON site, and the only reference that appears is an article uncovering touch therapy fraud. Type in “homeopathy,” and you get a mix: links to Web sites presenting evidence of its possible efficacy and to other sites asserting that homeopathy is merely a placebo system.

Clear-cut violators of the HONcode are sites such as Homeopathyworld.com, which displays the HON logo even though a click on the icon reveals a statement from HON that the site “does not respect” all of HON’s principles. Some sites that display the HONcode were certified several years ago and may be out of compliance. Boyer said that checking up on old verification is her group’s main issue and that HON is working on automatic techniques to continuously check compliance.

Boyer said that while the verification process continues to improve, the system is voluntary and the public must remember there are no guarantees that the information they may find on the Web is fact.

*“Attacking Their HONor. Some Dispute Value of Logo Used to Verify Accuracy, Integrity Of Health Web Site Contents” Copyright © The Washington Post. April 20, 2004 Full article at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A25556-2004Apr19.html>