

Poor Quality Websites on CAM dangerous for cancer patients

A study published in the Annals of Oncology has concluded that nearly 50% of the 32 most popular web sites on CAM (Complementary and Alternative Medicine) for cancer are not good quality. The study was conducted by experts in complementary medicine from the Universities of Exeter and Plymouth, under the direction of Professor Edzard Ernst.*

“The cancer cures discussed on these websites are not supported by good scientific evidence,” according to the study. Even worse, three websites are qualified as “outright dangerous”. These three sites had applied, but were rejected, by Health On the Net Foundation for HONcode certification.

On the positive side, “four web sites stand out” from the rest for the exemplary quality of their information and treatments: quackwatch.org, ebandolier.com, cis.nci.nih.gov and rosenthal.hs.columbia.edu. Three sites, quackwatch.org, rosenthal.hs.columbia.edu/ and cis.nci.nih.gov are HONcode certified by the Health On the Net Foundation. The full list of Web sites evaluated is provided in the study.

As an action plan, the study concludes that “cancer organisations and other impartial interest groups should investigate websites and create and administer a ‘seal of approval’, for safety and reliability, such as the HONcode”.

Today, HON counts more than 5,000 certified Web sites in some 72 countries worldwide that bear the HONcode seal. “With this expertise and notoriety, associated with major cancer organisations, HON can today implement such an action plan in order to protect and guide the citizen to safer and better quality online information,” commented Professor Antoine Geissbühler, President of HON Foundation and Director of the Service of Medical Informatics of the Geneva University Hospitals.

Similar codes exist, but the HONcode is the most widely displayed and the oldest, existing since 1995. The HONcode requires that information providers disclose potential conflicts of interest, provide credentials for authors relaying medical information, and link or otherwise reference the source of medical facts listed on the Web site. This fundamental study should raise patients’ awareness on the variability of the quality of web sites on CAM for specific diseases.

*“Assessing websites on complementary and alternative medicine for cancer” by K. Schmidt and E. Ernst, published by the Annals of Oncology number 15, pp 733-742, 2004, full article at <http://annonc.oupjournals.org/cgi/content/full/15/5/733>