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Book Review

Nicholas, David, Huntington, Paul, Jamali, Hamid & Williams, Peter. *Digital Health Information for the Consumer: Evidence and Policy Implications*. Published by Ashgate Publishing, Gower House, Croft Road, Aldershot, Hampshire GU11 3 HR, England. 2007, XIII, 258 p., Hardcover, ISBN 978-0-7546-4803-1, £55

Wide and easy availability of health information for the general public is something that governments consider beneficial to the public as it improves the public health, helps large-scale preventative medicine and eventually reduces the costs of health services for governments. Most counties have plans for providing the public with easy-reachable health information. Developed countries make use of new information and communication technologies such as the Internet, digital interactive televisions and touch screen kiosks for this purpose. However, using new channels and media for providing information services on sensitive issues such as public health is not free from challenge and every new service needs to be evaluated and monitored carefully for the best outcome. The book '*Digital Health Information for the Consumer: Evidence and Policy Implications*' is based on a range of qualitative and quantitative evaluative research studies conducted on several health information services in the UK.

The authors of this book investigated important resources of health-related information for general public in the UK including digital interactive television (such as NHS Direct Digital), Touchscreen kiosks (NHS Direct kiosks) and some websites. The aim of the book is to provide a detailed understanding of the use and the impact of key digital health information platforms and services to the general public in the UK during the period 2000-2005.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first chapter delineates the aims, objectives and the scope of the book and describes the methodologies used for the evaluation of health-related information resources. Authors stated that this book is built upon the findings of a large number of individual studies; however, they developed a unique set of methodologies called deep log analysis for their research.

The second chapter provided a review of the past publications on a number of issues related to the provision of digital health information. The main focus of the literature review is on the use and users of electronic health information systems. The chapter concludes that the acquisition and use of health information could result in both behavioural and clinical improvement.

The three chapters following the literature review present the findings of investigation on three different digital health information platforms.

Chapter three provides a detailed investigation of three different health kiosks. The studies are relatively thorough and they could be used as a successful model for researchers particularly for those conducting user studies in digital health information.

The next chapter presents the findings of the studies conducted on three different health websites including SurgeryDoor, NHS Direct online and Medicdirect. The studies evaluate the impact of these health websites in the UK. The longest section in this chapter is about NHS Direct online, a website designed to provide the general public with information about aspects of health and medical care.

Chapter five presents the studies conducted on the health digital interactive television (DiTV). Authors stated that the criteria they had used to evaluate the DiTV were similar to the ones used for the evaluation of the other platforms i.e. kiosks and websites. However, they mentioned that the services available in DiTV were more varied than with the other platforms.

Chapter 6, '*digital platform comparisons*', is the strong point of the book and it provides an excellent comparison of all platforms covered in the book. This chapter compares all of the platforms using criteria such as popularity, numbers of visits within a month, frequency of visits from each platform, usability & easiness of using each platform, frequency of visits from each section in each platform, coverage of users health information needs by each platform, health topics covered by each platform and etc. for example 82% of users mentioned that DiTV was the easiest platform to navigate, however the majority of them found internet navigation difficult. Even users believed that internet navigation was harder than either kiosks or DiTV.

The seventh chapter discusses the barriers and inequalities associated with health provision in the UK. The authors stated that they firstly, were looking for barriers created by the platforms themselves. For example they identified problems like '*search disclosure*' and '*digital visibility*' caused by platforms. Secondly they found some human barriers which included '*cultural factors*', '*confidence or proficiency with ICT*', '*mis-conceptions about the services and systems*', and '*lack of engagement by health professionals*'. The chapter is enlightening as the aim of wide provision of health services is to minimise the inequalities and a mismanaged or badly presented information service might lead to inequalities, hence the information-rich become richer and the information-poor become poorer.

The last chapter draws conclusions from the studies and discusses some of the implications of them for the policy makers. Overall, an interesting point, as authors mention, is the extent to which the various digital information platforms and services differed in terms of the kind of use they attracted, the people who used them and the purposes to which they were put.

In brief, the book is a valuable book and perhaps the only one to present such a wide range of thorough evaluative studies on mass provision of health information to the public. It can be a very helpful and enlightening resource for researchers, policy makers and those who are interested in the issues around the provision and the evaluation of health information services. As I mentioned earlier sometimes it is difficult to find a practical pattern to investigate issues related to health information. In addition, the approach applied by the authors to evaluate digital health information platforms is a new approach as the authors stated. Perhaps one small drawback to the book is lack of details on the methodologies applied as the methodology section of the book is short. However, the authors do provide a list of research articles published based on the studies presented in the book to which readers can refer for further details on the methodologies or individual studies conducted.

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