

# The good and bad of technology and health information

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## Editorial

Currently, a large amount of health information is at your fingertips, available on the Internet. For health professionals, it is relatively easy to separate what constitutes quality information from what has a low level of scientific rigor, by consulting specialized websites, databases, scientific libraries, and other sources. However, for patients, it has been very common to consult the internet to obtain information about their symptoms and illnesses. On the one hand, the patient being correctly informed about their condition is desirable. The better the patient understands their illness, the better their adherence to treatment and understanding of what is necessary for monitoring, especially in chronic illnesses. On the other hand, information obtained on the Internet is often unreliable and is issued by laypeople or by sources without concern for the scientific basis of what they convey. Patients are very likely to accept information that may be presented in an attractive way but is not based on scientific evidence. Many take as correct information that agrees with what they want to hear, tending to not value what goes against their beliefs. Belief in information obtained on the Internet can affect the doctor-patient relationship, an issue that was investigated in a 2017 review by authors from Singapore.<sup>1</sup> The researchers demonstrate that patients who search for information on the Internet have different strategies to use this information during the medical consultation, such as asking additional questions, making suggestions based on their online information, directly showing what they found on the Internet, or even bringing this information in print. There are factors that facilitate the communication of internet findings to the doctor, such as having a family member present at the consultation or showing an advertisement that recommends a given treatment and suggests that the patient talk to their doctor. On the other hand, the fear that the doctors may react unfavorably to knowledge acquired on the internet, perceiving this procedure as confronting their knowledge, may lead the patients to hide that they have carried out an online search.

A recent Spanish study on misinformation on the Internet showed that the highest prevalence of medical misinformation is spread on Twitter.<sup>2</sup> They found that the main topics of misinformation were vaccines, diets and eating disorders, drugs and tobacco, pandemics, communicable and non-communicable diseases, and medical treatments and health interventions. In Gastroenterology, more recent topics such as the brain-gut axis and the microbiota have been the focus of much misinformation. It is common to find people from different areas on social media inviting patients to undertake new therapeutic protocols, often citing in vitro work, or animal studies, as scientific evidence to support the treatments they recommend.

Clinics have emerged that supposedly specialize in procedures such as “intestinal modulation”, which advocate a hypothetical correction of intestinal dysbiosis through probiotics. Fad diets and serum infusions containing vitamins appear, all in the name of “improving immunity and intestinal health”. Guidelines are offered that have always been advised by good traditional medicine, but forgotten by many doctors, such as consideration of the patient’s psychosocial aspects, making room for the emergence of pseudo-specialties such as “integrative medicine”, which advocates a holistic approach to the patient and his illness as if traditional medicine did not recommend it. Social media provides an environment where anyone can talk about anything, and the power of so-called influencers in shaping the public’s opinion is great. It is essential that healthcare professionals are attentive to clarifying false or questionable information from a scientific point of view to their patients. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the same media used to disseminate misinformation can be extremely useful if used to correctly report health data, requiring more effective action in this regard.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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