



The Health On the Net Foundation: an NGO certifying Health websites worldwide and offering free services to citizens around the world

Sarah Cruchet, Arnaud Gaudinat, Celia Boyer

Health On the Net Foundation, Geneva, Switzerland

Background: The ever-increasing volume of health online information, coupled with the uneven reliability and quality, may have considerable implications for the citizen. As early as 1995, the HON founders foresaw that consumers, newly empowered to research their own medical conditions, could easily fall prey to misleading advice found online. The origins of diverse information sources needed to be considered, weighed and analyzed. With no international legal framework, consumers urgently needed a means to check the reliability and the relevance of health information, and enhanced access to information of the highest quality.

Methods and Results: The Health On the Net Foundation (HON) is the leading organization in promoting and guiding the deployment of useful and reliable online medical and health information. HON introduced the first Code of Conduct [1] for online health information providers, the HONcode, which has now over 5,800 participating websites. HONcode is the most used ethical and trustworthy code for medical and health related information available on Internet. It is composed by 8 principles [2] which are respected by all certified websites. HON expanded the HONcode certification and enforcement activities to include collaborators in diverse linguistic and cultural areas. HON was recently chosen by the French National Authority to be the official organization for certifying all French Health websites. A searchable database of both HONcode and HAS certified websites is available on the HON website: http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/Search/HAS/index_f.html

Certification is a huge task and HON was the first to integrate learning approach [3] based on a recognized and detailed model of trust (HONcode) to improve the certification process at both quality and quantity level. However, labeling and certification alone are not enough to help the final user and particularly, access to this meta-information in a transparent way is crucial. Then, HON has developed several technical initiatives to enforce the certification through the daily life of the internet user, such as specialized search engine, collaboration with Google Co-op, toolbar, dynamic seal and remote certificate.

Conclusion: HON fulfills its mission to guide the growing online community to sound, reliable medical information and expertise. HON Foundation welcomes further international collaboration as it pursues the integration of state of the art technologies for the benefit of citizens worldwide. And finally participates to the improvement of the



Health Web site quality by educating web publisher through the application of the HONcode certification process[4].

[1] Selby M, Boyer C, Jenefski DA, Appel RD. *Health On the Net Foundation Code of Conduct for Medical and Health Websites*. MedNet 96 - European Congress on the Internet in Medicine, Brighton, U.K., Oct. 14 to 17, 1996.

[2] <http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html>

[3] Gaudinat A, Grabar N, Boyer C. *Machine learning approach for automatic quality criteria detection of health web pages*. Stud Health Technol Inform. 2007;129:705-9. PMID: [17911808](#)

[4] S.A. Adams and A.A. de Bont, More than just a mouse click: Research into work practices behind the assignment of medical trust marks on the World Wide Web, *Int J Med Inform.* **76** (2007) (S1), pp. 14–20.