

PATIENTS' SATISFACTION WITH THE AMOUNT AND THE UNDERSTANDABILITY OF INFORMATION FROM GPs

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ABSTRACT

It has been acknowledged that the improvement of individuals' health information can produce many benefits. Past research has examined the topic of health information rather extensively, emphasising on specific or serious illnesses that involve specialist doctors' expertise. This study has chosen to focus on the context of patients' consultations with GPs. An online questionnaire was circulated using the non-probability voluntary response and snowballing sampling methods. The collected data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Software version 28, with generated descriptive statistics and Chi Square Tests results. The research outcome indicated that though respondents do ask questions of their GPs, their frequencies of making enquiries differ. The satisfaction with the amount and the understandability of the health information provided by GPs are of average levels. Despite the popularity of online resources, hardcopy notes is the preferred medium of health communication. Based on the research results, one of the recommendations is that health authorities and GPs could do more to drive patients' information-seeking propensity. In addition, even in a technology-enabled era, there is still merit in creating and availing printed materials to help improve the perceived quality of health information.

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INTRODUCTION

Health Information

Improving individuals' health information and their capability to use it successfully has been progressively recognised as a public health goal.^{1,2} The level of patients' health information could result in more informed decisions, better clinical outcomes, and subsequently lower healthcare costs in a community.^{3,4} However, in order to attain such efficacious consequences, patients have to participate by

actively seeking information and asking medically relevant questions.^{5,6}

Given the myriad of sources, it is not surprising that more patients, even those who have serious conditions such as cancer,^{7,8,9} are assembling health information online. However, despite the popularity and predominance of the internet, healthcare professionals are still the most conventional and favoured source for getting information.^{10, 11}

As patients often do not have experience to know how much they want to know, the onus is on doctors to make the judgement. It was highlighted that most patients, including those who are well educated and articulate, would prefer information that is just enough and simple to understand in their moments of vulnerability and stress.^{12,13,14}

The general recommendations are for doctors to avoid medical jargon, break down instructions into small specific steps, limit the focus to three key points, and utilise visual aids that are written at a low grade of reading standard.⁶ There were also suggestions of inserting more pictures to increase the clarity of communication and lessen the negative effects of patients' low literacy skills.^{15,16}

Role of GPs

As GPs have access to a wide segment of the community, they have an integral task in delivering preventive care and managing chronic illnesses.^{17,18} As a result of the fight against the coronavirus in the past few years, GPs have taken on an even bigger responsibility.¹⁹ By virtue of their role in the healthcare system, the practice of having a chosen GP as the first contact has existed for decades in countries such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Sweden.²⁰

Research Objective

Past research projects that examined the topic of health information had largely focused on illnesses that require specialist doctors' expertise. This study centres on the specific category of GPs – which is timely and relevant, especially with Singapore's national plan to pair residents with GPs. The main aim is to determine patients' level of satisfaction with the health information that they receive from GPs.

METHODS

Aligned with the above-stated research objective, the following research questions were formulated:

- Do patients proactively seek information during consultations with GPs?
- Are patients satisfied with the amount and the understandability of health information that is provided?

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- What medium do patients prefer health information to be delivered in?

In mid-March to early April 2022, an online questionnaire (with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.784) on Qualtrics platform was disseminated. A non-probability sampling plan was adopted in which the researcher's personal contents helped to complete the questionnaire, and then (through snowballing method) forwarded it to other respondents.

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

A total of 93 responses were collected, and after data cleansing, 75 responses were usable. Based on past research findings, the general criterion for a suitable sample size is in excess of 30.²¹

The respondents comprised 21.3 percent male (n=16) and 73.3 percent female (n=55), with another 5.3 percent (n=4) who declined to specify their sex. The respondents belonged to varied age groups. The largest group (57.3 percent, n=43) was between 31 to 50 years old, followed by 24.0 percent (n=18) who were 51 years old and older. The remaining 18.7 percent (n=14) were between 18 to 30 years old. The demographics are as shown in **Table I**.

Table I: Demographics

Age	Frequency	Percent
18-30 years old	14	18.7
31-50 years old	43	57.3
≥51 years old	18	24.0
Sex	Frequency	Percent
Male	16	21.3
Female	55	73.3
Prefer not to indicate	4	5.3

Despite the relatively mature ages of the respondents, the majority (70.7 percent, n=53) do not have any medical condition that requires ongoing interventions. Only 25.3 percent (n=19) are currently on a regime of treatment or medication. Three respondents (4 percent) preferred not to disclose for this question item.

A total of 54.7 percent (n=41) respondents have their regular GPs. This percentage may be related to one-quarter of the total sample size having existing medical conditions. Another 40.0 percent (n=30) do not have their regular GPs and the balance of 5.3 percent (n=4) preferred not to indicate.

Though the large majority of respondents (73 out of 74) do ask questions of GPs, there is a difference in their frequency of information-seeking. Only 57.3 percent (n=43) always

ask questions while the other considerable 41.3 percent (n=31) only do so sometimes.

Patients' Evaluation of Health Information from GPs

Regarding the amount of information that GPs provide, the majority of respondents appear to be satisfied (60 percent, n=45), as shown in **Chart I**. It is noteworthy that a sizeable number (37.3 percent, n=28) are neutral or dissatisfied with this aspect, leading to a resultant mean score of 3.56 (out of a maximum of 5).

Chart I: Satisfaction with amount of health information (mean = 3.56 out of max 5)

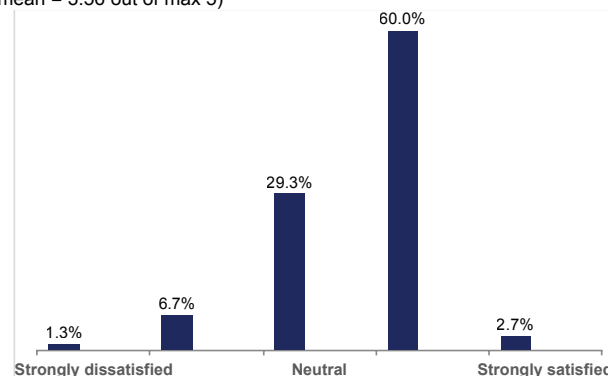
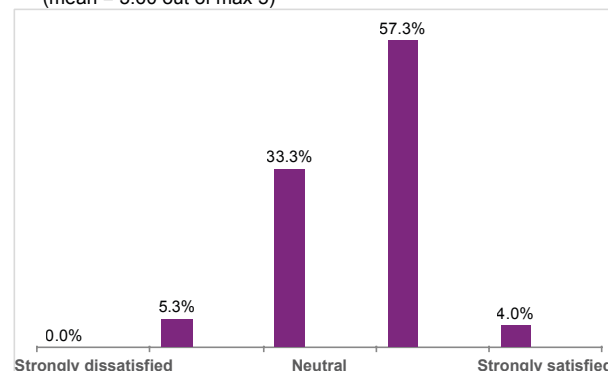


Chart II: Satisfaction with understandability of health information (mean = 3.60 out of max 5)



Based on Chi-Square Test results, there is no statistically significant association between demographics (i.e., sex or age) and the satisfaction levels with the amount as well as comprehensibility of the health information. The respondents' satisfaction levels in both aspects are also not correlated with their medical conditions.

However, there is statistically significant correlation between having a regular GP and the satisfaction of the information being understandable ($r=13.691$, $p=0.033$). Respondents with regular GPs indicate a higher level of satisfaction with the understandability of information, compared to respondents who do not have regular GPs. However, the correlation is weak with Cramer's $V=0.033$.

Patients' Preferred Medium to Receive Health Information

As shown in **Chart III**, respondents would like to have health information verbally said to them. A considerable

96.0 percent (n=72) agree or strongly agree that such direct communication is preferred. In addition, 74.7 percent (n=56) of them would like to have written or printed content (refer to **Chart IV**).

Chart III: Preferred medium for health information – Verbally said

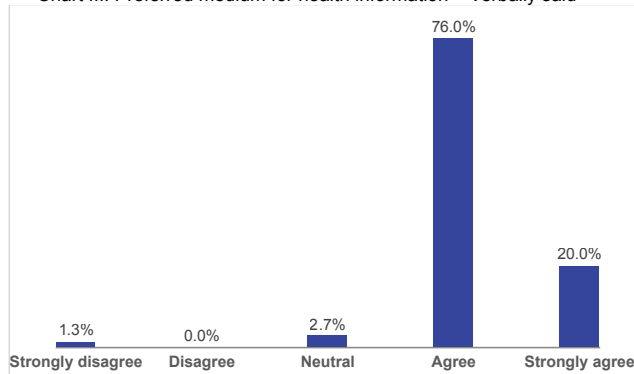
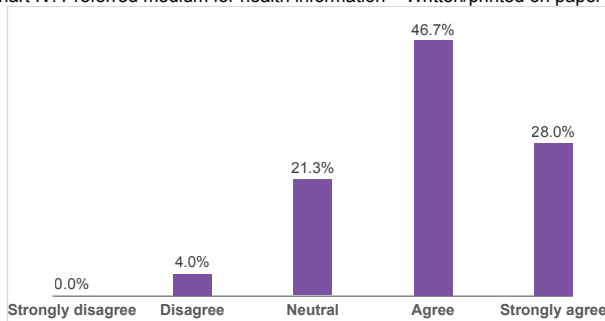
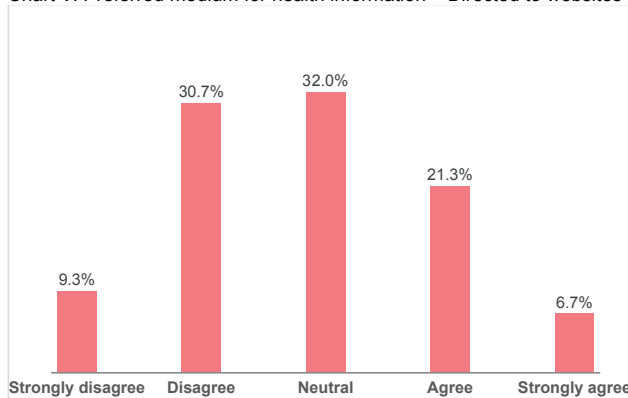


Chart IV: Preferred medium for health information – Written/printed on paper



Despite the prevalence of online sources, only 28.0 percent (n=21) agree or strongly agree that they would like to be directed to websites for health information (refer to **Chart V**). The mean score of 2.85 (out of a maximum of 5) signifies a general sense of neutrality and even disagreement about the use of online channel for the purpose of health education.

Chart V: Preferred medium for health information – Directed to websites



Chi-Square Tests reveal no statistically significant correlation between age and the preferred medium for information. There is also no statistically significant correlation between existing medical conditions and the preferred medium. However, there is a statistically significant albeit weak association between sex and the preference for websites ($r=16.558$, $p=0.035$, Cramer's $V=0.332$). Relatively, more males than females strongly disagree that they would like to be directed to a website for health information.

DISCUSSION

While the respondents in this study do proactively ask questions of GPs, their frequency of doing so is varied. They appear to differ on how much they want to know, which is similar to findings in past research.²²

The satisfaction levels with the amount and the understandability of health information appear to have room for improvement. Respondents' most preferred source of information is the GPs' verbal words, which could be supplemented by written or printed materials. This current favouring of conventional sources over online websites is aligned with earlier findings.^{7,11,23}

One limitation of this study is that the respondents, who were gathered through the non-probability voluntary and snowballing sampling methods, are similar in their educational attainment. For future research, the sample unit can be expanded to include individuals with lower literacy levels. They might perceive and assess the amount, the understandability, and the medium of health information differently.^{6,24}

CONCLUSION

With 42.6 percent (n=31) of respondents asking questions only sometimes or not even asking, more could be done by the health authorities and GPs themselves to educate and encourage patients to be more active in information-seeking. With the indicated preference for written or printed information, more effort could also be invested to produce reading materials that are simple and clear. As the literature has suggested, even well-educated individuals want easy and understandable information when going through the stresses of illness or injury.^{7,14,25}

Improving individuals' health information has far-reaching benefits for the patients and the entire public health sector. It is thus vital to recognise that GPs, with their first points of contact with the community, have a critical role in shaping the quality of health information to patients.

DECLARATION OF AUTHOR CONTRIBUTORSHIP

The author is responsible for the design and execution of the research project (including data collection and analysis) as well as the writing of this article.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in relation to this article.

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