Gender Differences in Online Messages Among Cancer Patients

Trine Andersen RN, Annette Jeneson MA, Cornelia M. Ruland RN, Ph.D
Center for Shared Decisionmaking and Nursing Research
Rikshospitalet-Radiumhospitalet Medical Center, Oslo, Norway

Background

While previous research on online patient discussion groups has provided insights into patients' information and communication needs, little is known wether women and men use online discussion groups differently

Purpose

We explored gender differences in messages submitted to online support groups contained in an internet support system for breast- and prostate cancer patients called *WebChoice*

About WebChoice

WebChoice is an internet support system for breast- and prostate cancer patients where

- **Patients can monitor symptoms over time**
- **Patients have access to evidence-based self-management options tailored to their reported symptoms as well as general information about living with cancer**
- **Patients can ask questions to a clinical nurse specialist on mail and exchange experiences with other patients in anonymous discussion groups.**

A currently ongoing randomized clinical trial evaluates effects of WebChoice on patient outcomes

Sample

- **We examined 355 postings submitted by 43 women and 31 men undergoing treatment for breast- or prostate cancer and who logged on to WebChoice at least once during a period of eight months**

- **The sample constitutes 71% of study participants in the experimental group with access to WebChoice**

Procedure

- **Each posting were coded under 1 to 3 response categories, dependent on number of category types within the same posting (e.g. the participant were sharing personal experiences as well as information seeking)**

- **All postings were coded independently by two of the authors with an inter-rater agreement of 98%. Uncertainties were solved through discussion**

Women participated more in discussion groups

- More women than men made use of the internet support system
- Women participated considerably more in the online support groups than men
- Women submitted more postings each

Results

Gender Differences in Number of Forum Postings

	Male	Female
Subjects logged on to WebChoice	31 (42%)	43 (58%)
Total avergage # of postings	66	289
# of subjects submitting posting(s)	9 (29%)	25 (58%)
Average of postings pr subject who submitted postings	7,44	11,52

Results

Women were more information giving while men were more information seeking

- **Personal experiences was the most used message type for both men and women**
- **Women were more information giving than men, while men were more information seeking**
- **Both gender groups were equally supportive of each other**
- **Men were more often thankful in their responses than women**

Gender Differences in Response Categories

	Male	Female
Personal experiences	46 (70%)	220 (76%)
Information giving	8 (12%)	64 (22%)
Information seeking	19 (29%)	53 (18%)
Support	12 (18%)	49 (17%)
Thanks	14 (21%)	16 (6%)

Conclusion

This study revealed interesting gender differences in messages submitted by breast- and prostate cancer patients.

However, more research on online communication among patients with less gender specific diagnoses is needed to explore gender differences in communication style further

Acknowledgments

We thank Laura Slaughter and Gro Grimsbø for useful discussions
This research was funded by The Norwegian “Health and Rehabilitation” Grant

References

Klemm P, Hurst M, Dearholt SL, and Trone SR, 1999. Cyber: Solace: Gender Differences on Internet Cancer Support Groups. Comput Nurs 17(2): 65-72

Ruland CM, Andersen R (2004) Designing WebChoice – Individualized Support for Cancer Patients through the Internet. Medinfo, San Francisco, Sept 5-11, 2004, p. 1840

Address for correspondence

Cornelia M. Ruland RN, Ph.D
Center for Shared Decisionmaking and Nursing Research,
Rikshospitalet-Radiumhospitalet HF,
N-0027 Oslo, Norway
Cornelia.ruland@rr-research.no