Analysis of cases of harm associated with use of health information on the Internet
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Authors’ objectives
To examine the number and characteristics of cases of harm associated with the use of health information available on the Internet.

Searching
The following sources were searched: MEDLINE from 1966 to February 2001; CINAHL from 1982 to March 2001; HealthSTAR from 1975 to December 2000; PsycINFO from 1967 to March 2001; and EMBASE from 1980 to March 2001. This was complemented with a review of the reference lists of relevant articles.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
Case reports of harm were included.

Specific interventions included in the review
Any health-related information on the Internet was eligible for inclusion in the review. Harm associated with e-mail or intentional harm was not excluded.

Participants included in the review
Any persons who had looked for, used and suffered some ill effects from the information obtained via the Internet, were included.

Outcomes assessed in the review
The outcomes were the incidence and nature of adverse effects.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
Two of the authors independently evaluated all citations for eligibility, with any disagreements resolved by consensus or by the third author.

Assessment of study quality
The authors do not state that they assessed validity.

Data extraction
Two of the authors extracted the following data: first author, publication type, publication year and journal; number of participants, age and health status; type of information obtained from the Internet; type, severity, duration, management, and outcome of harm; and suggested mechanism of harm.

Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
The cases were described and summarised narratively.

How were differences between studies investigated?
No studies were found. The individual case reports were described separately.

Results of the review
Three papers, which included a total of four case reports of harm associated with health-related information from the Internet, were identified.

There was a dearth of information on harm associated with the use of the Internet. Two of the cases were of emotional distress that resulted from people finding erroneous information on the Internet. Both cases arose because the people had not understood or properly remembered the information given to them by their doctor, and this was compounded by using, for example, incorrect search terms. Two articles related to physical harm. One was of a man who used an inappropriate treatment for his dogs. The other was a case of a man who used hydrazine to self-medicate for cancer on the advice of a website promoting this use. This patient died of hepatorenal failure as an adverse effect of hydrazine sulphate.

**Authors’ conclusions**
Despite the popularity of publications warning of the potential harm associated with using health information from the Internet, the search found few reported cases of harm. This may be due to an actual low risk for harm or to an under-reporting of cases, or to bias.

**CRD commentary**
This was a review of an unusual but topical subject. The very broad inclusion criteria used by the authors were appropriate, particularly given the dearth of relevant literature identified. The authors' search was comprehensive in terms of the traditional electronic databases searched. However, as stated by the authors, a review of cases posted on the Internet itself would have probably been a better starting point. The methodology of this systematic review was well described. The individual cases identified were described and summarised appropriately.

The authors' conclusions are supported by the review and its findings.

**Implications of the review for practice and research**

**Practice:** The authors did not state any implications for practice.

**Research:** The authors state 'The Internet itself may prove to be the most effective source of information about harm associated with its use and the most effective vehicle to disseminate it. We hope that a systematic review of information available on the Internet will be conducted soon'.

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This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.