

USING INSTANT MESSAGING/LIVE HELP TO ANSWER INTERNET INQUIRIES

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Background

In the United States there are 110 million Internet users; 45% of these seek health information; one third are looking for cancer information. However, Internet users often have difficulty in finding and understanding the information posted on the Web. Instant messaging (IM) is a one-on-one, live text conversation over the Internet. It is being used by the U.S. Cancer Information Service (CIS) to provide assistance to people using the National Cancer Institute's CancerNet and CIS websites. IM users can get assistance with answers to cancer questions, help with navigation of the NCI websites, assistance with searching databases or ordering educational materials.

Case History

Live Help (the IM service provided by the U.S. Cancer Information Service) provides database search and navigation support, answers to cancer inquiries, and assistance with resources and referrals. The program was pilot tested from January-March 2001 and went online in late March offering text conversations with CIS Information Specialists Monday-Friday, 12-4 pm. Although the skills and training of Information Specialists to provide help over the telephone has many similarities, the differences of providing this type of help in text messaging are providing challenges.

Conclusions

The public's use of the Internet for cancer information is growing. Just providing information on a website may not be sufficient for lay audiences to read, interpret, and inform themselves in order to make informed decisions about their health care. Information services need to provide assistance wherever and however the public wants to get their information.

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