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Power of the written word

The power of the written word is considerable. Even today we often tend to take what we read in newspapers, books and journals as being correct and true. We make the assumption the writer has checked the facts, looked at the situation as a whole, done all the homework and written a fair and balanced report, article or story. We do this despite the fact that at times we read about something we understand well and the article is often incorrect and biased. Yet we forget this when read about things we do not know about because life is too short these days to question and check everything, and often we feel it does not matter too much anyway.

Do the same assumptions exist in our dental reading? I suspect they do, because articles in dental publications are often quoted anecdotally or in other articles as if they must be true simply because someone has written them down. The danger in this is obvious. Articles in publications that are not peer-reviewed may not be scrutinised at all but simply published as they stand. They are the views of the author and nothing more. In many situations this may not be too important, but if patient treatment is involved then surely we have a responsibility to be sure the information we read is correct rather than simply assume it is.

One way of ensuring information is accurate is to read it in a peer-reviewed (or refereed) article or paper. We assume we can trust information from a reputable source, and while it is obviously true that the process of peer review is more likely to ensure the content is accurate and relevant, this only works when you know whether the journal is peer-reviewed, and more importantly which articles have gone through the refereeing process. To help readers do exactly this, the BDJ, like many other journals, identifies all the articles that have been refereed in the small print on the first page of the article.

Even here there are traps for the unwary. References in articles, on advertisements or used in lecture presentations often quote authentic-sounding journals to prove a point or justify a case, but how do we know if the journal is peer-reviewed, or whether the papers quoted have indeed been refereed. Surely there should be a method of identifying this within the reference itself, such as the letters pr (for peer review). This would

tell people that this particular paper had gone through the peer review process, which would be a start.

Unfortunately it would not identify the actual peer review process itself, which can vary from journal to journal, and is open to abuse (and sometimes abused). It is still too easy to credit research findings with apparent validity by simply quoting a reference, and trading on the fact that because something has been published then it must be true. As I stated earlier, the written word is still powerful.

But does the power of the written word extend to the internet? Do we believe what we read on a screen (or a printout?) as easily as we believe what we read in a newspaper or journal? I suspect not. There is something about written words on paper that someone else has published that has a subtle permanence suggesting it is somehow more correct. Words on a screen lack that permanence (we all know how easy it is to edit a word document) and a printout of a page on the screen is just not the same as a page in a magazine or journal.

Yet we know that some patients will search the internet for information about their illness (or perceived problem) and then arrive at the doctor or dentist with printouts of information, many from inappropriate sites. This subject is explored in the paper *The nature and quality of periodontal related patient information on the world-wide web* in this issue of the BDJ (page 657) and the findings are a tad worrying. Most of the sites that common search engines identified were unofficial sites (mainly dental practices in the USA) with information of variable (and sometimes questionable) quality.

So what can we do about ensuring that people know whether to trust the words they read, whether in print or on the screen? I believe it is time scientific publishing looked at ways of ensuring readers identify which references refer to peer-reviewed papers easily and quickly, so they can judge the data and the conclusions more effectively. The internet is more difficult, partly because of the amount of information but more because it is so easy for anyone to publish anything. But I still believe we have a responsibility to try.

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