

Seeking health information online among young, rural women: association with physical, mental and reproductive health

Ingrid J Rowlands¹, Annette J Dobson¹, Deborah Loxton², Gita D Mishra¹

¹Centre for Longitudinal and Life Course Research, School of Population Health, University of Queensland; ²Priority Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing, University of Newcastle

Introduction

Going online for health information may be particularly useful for women living in rural and remote areas of Australia where access to health services is often limited. However, relatively little is known about the extent to which young women use the Internet as a health information resource and whether use differs by health status and among women living in rural and urban areas. We aimed to identify the physical, mental and reproductive health factors associated with Internet use for health information, and whether this differed by area of residence.

Methods

We use data from 17,069 young women aged 18-23 years in 2012-13 who participated in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health. The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH) is a national study focusing on the biological, psychological, social and economic factors relevant to women's health [1].

The original three cohorts of Australian women, who were aged 18-23 years, 45-50 years, and 70-75 years when the project began in 1996, are sent self-report surveys on a triennial basis to explore their health and wellbeing. The 40,000 participants were randomly selected using the national health insurance database (Medicare), which includes all permanent residents of Australia. Women in rural and remote area were oversampled to ensure that their health and health service needs could be adequately assessed.

In 2012-13, ALSWH recruited a new cohort of young women born 1989-95 and aged 18-23 when they were first surveyed. Participants were recruited through conventional (e.g., magazine advertising) and online social media avenues (e.g., Facebook) and completed a web-based survey similar to previous ALSWH surveys sent to the young women (full details reported elsewhere). Approval for the study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Newcastle and the University of Queensland, as well as the Department of Human Services and the Department of Health. Further details of the survey methodology are available from the study website (<http://alswh.org.au>).

Statistical analysis

Multivariable logistic regression was used to estimate the association between physical, mental and reproductive health factors and Internet use for health information among young women aged 18-23 years in 2012-13 who were residing in urban, regional and rural areas.

Results

Overall, women accessed around three sources of information for their health. Doctors (77%) followed by family members (62%) and the Internet (44%) were the top three sources of health information. Women from urban and regional areas who used the Internet for health information were more likely to report psychological distress, self-reported mental health diagnoses, urinary or bowel symptoms, and menstrual symptoms than women who did not use the Internet. However, urban and regional women with children were less likely to use the internet for health information. In contrast, women from rural areas who had children were somewhat more likely use the internet as were those who had high levels of psychological distress.

Conclusions

Young women from regional and rural areas do rely on the Internet for their health information. Internet use is particularly common among regional and rural women experiencing psychological distress and among mothers living in rural areas and this has important implications for health service

providers and public health policy. While the Internet offers anonymised information and support, it is important to develop strategies to assist, and direct, women to credible online health resources. Professionally supported, online self-care programs tailored to young women living in regional and rural areas may be important.

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Presenter

Ingrid Rowlands' interests focus on young women's health, particularly the psychosocial aspects of women's reproductive health. Ingrid has a background in psychology, completing both her undergraduate and doctoral studies within The School of Psychology at The University of Queensland. In her PhD she used data from over 14,000 young women born in 1973-78 in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH) to examine women's adjustment to miscarriage. Following this, she worked as a postdoctoral research fellow at QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute on a national, Australian study of women with endometrial cancer, focusing on women's quality of life following treatment. In this role, she also led a study exploring young women's fertility concerns following a diagnosis of gynaecological cancer. In 2014, Ingrid moved back to The University of Queensland, working within The Centre for Research Excellence in Women's Health in the 21st Century (CREWH21). Ingrid's current work within CREWH21 focuses on the physical, mental and reproductive health and health service use of a new cohort of 17,000 young women, born in 1989-95, who were first surveyed in 2012 when they were aged 18-23. Ingrid is comparing the outcomes of these young women to the original cohort of young women (born in 1973-78) who were surveyed 17 years previously when they were also aged 18-23. This enables changes in women's health and wellbeing to be examined against the backdrop of policy changes over the past 17 years.