

NetWellness 1995 - 2005: Ten Years of Experience and Growth as a Non-Profit Consumer Health Information and Ask-an-Expert Service
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ABSTRACT

In the 10 years since its inception, NetWellness (NW) has grown from a regional demonstration project to service the health information needs of an international audience. We present data regarding NW's growth, usage statistics, data regarding the contributions of our volunteer faculty, representative feedback of visitors, and future plans for this successful service.

BACKGROUND

NetWellness (NW) is a Web-based consumer health information and Ask-an-Expert service. Since its inception in 1995, NW has grown from a regional service to one that regularly serves an international audience. Health sciences faculty from Ohio's three major medical research universities—University of Cincinnati, Case Western Reserve University, and The Ohio State University—volunteer their services to create and evaluate content and provide Ask-an-Expert service to NW visitors. Funding to manage and maintain the NW service comes from governmental and non-commercial grants including partner university support. Anonymous access to the site and its services is available to any Internet user. All health information is authored or reviewed by experts from NW partner universities and is reviewed for readability and general consumption prior to posting.

GROWTH AND USAGE

NW Website usage statistics have been collected and maintained since its inception. At the start, NW focused on addressing the regional needs of Ohio residents and encouraged visitor access through regional collaborations with public libraries and schools. Since then, individual hits to the site have increased more than 40-fold, from 23,000 per month in June 1995 (mostly from Ohio) to over 1,400,000 per month as of February 2005. Visitors now represent 106 countries and every continent. Within the US, voluntarily provided zip code information indicates that there were visitors from at least 41 US states during a representative 6-month period in 2004. Along with the growth of our audience, NW volunteer expert contributors have steadily increased from just a few in 1995 to over 300 regular contributors today. These medical experts include

physicians, nurses and pharmacists, and other allied health professionals, who all contribute their services free of charge. This has also led to a steady increase in our content; the NW database currently contains over 25,000 questions and answers covering the spectrum of human health issues.

CONSUMER FEEDBACK

NW has always protected the anonymity of its visitors by not collecting identifiable information. However, we do offer an opportunity to provide feedback. All feedback is reviewed and considered in an ongoing effort to improve the service. The number of visitors providing feedback has grown along with the overall growth of NW. For instance, while there were 3855 feedback sessions processed in 2003, this increased to 8865 in 2004. While not necessarily representative of the overall visitor population, such feedback provides valuable insights into the characteristics of a portion of NW users. Representative feedback submitted in 2004 follows. The majority of respondents felt that NW was *easy to read* (86%), *easy to understand* (80%), *helpful* (72%), and *useful* (69%). When asked for whom the visitor was seeking health information, 56% indicated it was for *myself*, while the rest were seeking for *a family member* (23%), *a friend* (7%), *my students* (3%), *class project* (14%), and *other* (7%). Regarding the utility of NW information, 21% said it led them to ask their healthcare provider new questions, 15% said it helped them make a decision about treatment, 14% said it change their approach to health maintenance, 14% said it helped them decide to see a healthcare provider, 11% said it prompted them to seek a second opinion, 10% said it helped them care for someone else, and 8% each said it helped them meet requirements for a course assignment or prepare for teaching a class.

CONCLUSIONS

NetWellness has grown in the last 10 years to become a heavily visited consumer health information service providing free and unbiased expert content to a wide range of health information consumers. Many visitors find the service to be useful and valuable. Future plans include enhancing interactivity and offering new content and services customized for the consumer.