Effective US health system websites: establishing benchmarks and standards for effective consumer engagement.

Hospitals and health systems are playing increasingly important roles as care coordination hubs and consumer information sources. In particular, the accountable care organization (ACO) and medical home models promoted in the Affordable Care Act place hospitals at the center of many activities related to health information exchange. Therefore, it is important for these organizations to have effective websites, and the need for a social media presence to connect with consumers is growing quickly. The purpose of this study is to assess the websites of hospitals and health systems on four dimensions: accessibility, content, marketing, and technology. In addition, an overall score is calculated to identify the top 25 hospital and health system websites. Specific website elements that healthcare managers can inspect visually are described for each dimension in the discussion section. Generally, hospital and health system websites can be more effective from an end user's perspective. In particular, hospitals and health systems lagged on the accessibility scale that measures the education level required to understand the language used on a site. The scale also assesses the extent to which web pages are designed for ease of movement from page to page using embedded links. Given that healthcare consumers come from every demographic and stratum of society, it is important that user-friendliness be optimized for a broadly defined audience. Hospital and health system websites can also be improved on the technology scale, as many sites do not return clear descriptions of links to search engines such as Google and Bing that use webcrawlers to...
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