

Promoting the Advantages of HONcode Website Accreditation in Taiwan

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Objective: The Internet has become one of the most widely-used communication tools in the world and with various softwares available to the public, anyone with some time and effort, can design a website and present any kind of information on the Web. The problem is therefore no longer finding the information, but assessing the credibility of the information, as well as the relevance and accuracy of a document retrieved from the Internet. In some cases, websites provide no appropriate documentation regarding the scientific design of a medical study, nor are studies made available that support the given claims. This paper will share the experiences of Jen-Ai Hospital – Tali (<http://site.jah.org.tw/chinese/chinese.asp> & <http://baby.jah.org.tw>), a Regional Teaching Hospital located in Taichung County, and the invaluable rewards of undergoing HONcode website accreditation, which is probably the highest medical ethics standard available on the Internet.

Materials and Methods: In 1996, the Health On the Net Foundation, a Swiss non-governmental organization, created HONcode - the 8 Principles in its Code of Conduct (<http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html>) to help standardize the reliability of medical and health information available on the Web. The HONcode is not an award system, nor does it intend to rate the quality of the information provided by a website. It only defines a set of rules to hold website developers to “basic” ethical standards in the presentation of the information and help remind the public to be aware of the source and the purpose of the data that they are reading. The HONcode aims to raise the quality of

healthcare information available on the Internet. It is a self-regulatory, voluntary certification system based on an "active seal" concept. While primarily intended for healthcare site developers and publishers, the blue-and-red HONcode seal on subscribing sites also helps users identify sources of reliable information. Some 6,500 websites, representing 118 countries, are now formal HONcode subscribers, of which about 50% of these websites are based in the U.S., but the proportion of European and other non-U.S. sites has been steadily growing in the past few years. The requirement for medical and health websites to be recognized with HONcode involves the compliance of 8 basic principles, including authority, complementarity, confidentiality, attribution, justifiability, transparency, financial disclosure and advertising policy. The HONcode now exists in 34 language versions. In order to raise the quality and reliability of healthcare information available on the Internet in Taiwan, Jen-Ai Hospital – Tali spent about a total of 6 months to redesign their websites to become the first hospital in Taiwan to pass the HONcode accreditation. In addition, the hospital prepared the Traditional Chinese version of HONcode's 8 ethical principles for medical and health websites, which has been made available on the HON's website: http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/Chinese_traditional.

Results: In Taiwan, there are only 8 websites that adhere to the HONcode (2 of which belongs to Jen-Ai Hospital – Tali - <http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html?HONConduct945686> & <http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html?HONConduct315342>) and since receiving the HONcode website accreditation, the hospital has been extremely fortunate in receiving numerous local and international website awards, namely, Department of Health's "Excellent Medical Website Award" in 2003, 2004 & 2005; in addition, becoming the only Regional Teaching Hospital to receive a special symbol of "Excellent Medical Website Award 2004 ~ 2006"; receiving the "National Biotechnology & Medical Care Quality Award" in Medical Information Website Category, also in 2004; our abstract in Chinese was accepted at the 3rd Annual Taiwan Medical Quality

Conference in 2005; 2 abstracts in English was accepted at the International Hospital Federation Asian Pacific Regional Conference in 2006; another abstract in English was accepted at the International Hospital Federation World Hospital Congress in 2007; another abstract in Chinese was accepted at the Cross-Straits Medical Quality Conference in 2008; etc. All of these accomplishments were made possible due to the initial HONcode website accreditation, which was obtained in 2003, and the subsequent, annual re-accreditation, as HONcode needs to be re-accredited on a yearly basis. This past year marks the 5th year that Jen-Ai Hospital websites have been re-accredited by the HON Foundation.

Conclusion: By adhering to the highest medical ethics standard available on the Internet, Jen-Ai Hospital – Tali was fortunate to have many accomplishments with their website projects. In order to raise the quality and reliability of healthcare information available on the Internet in Taiwan, our hospital introduced HONcode's 8 ethical principles in Traditional Chinese. Jen-Ai Hospital – Tali strongly believes that, especially in recent years, many of the medical websites in Taiwan already meet HONcode's high standards, but simply need to undergo the website accreditation process to prove its accountability. It is the hope of Jen-Ai Hospital – Tali that more and more health-related websites in Taiwan will become responsible enough to apply for HONcode website accreditation, like the 6,500+ websites in the U.S., Europe and other developed countries, so that the people in Taiwan can have the same rights as the people in other countries, in determining the credibility of the information, as well as the relevance and accuracy of a document retrieved from the Internet. And only by this method, will it raise the quality and reliability of healthcare information in Taiwan, which is mainly written in the Traditional Chinese language.

Keywords: HONcode, website accreditation, Internet, medical ethics, highest standard,

quality information