

The role of digital in lay consultation networks and healthcare access among university students: a questionnaire development study

Abstract

Background

Lay consultation is a process of discussing health concerns with sources which are not a part of the formal healthcare system. Lay consultation originally involved members of someone's social network (e.g. friends and family members), but the increased reliance on digital technologies enabled online resources to be integrated into the lay consultation process. University students in particular are avid users of digital technologies, and they are also known to have a low engagement with the medical system despite being exposed to many risk factors for poor health.

Aim and methods

This study aimed to develop a questionnaire for investigating lay consultation networks of university students. Focus groups (n=2) and cognitive interviews (n=9) with current undergraduate students were conducted to guide the questionnaire development. The purpose of focus groups was to inform the questionnaire content, while the cognitive interviews were used to test whether all the questionnaire items performed as intended.

Results

The focus group discussions spanned topics such as the timing of students' lay consultation, the use of Internet for lay consultation, the reasons for engaging with lay consultants and the attributes associated with different types of consultants. The focus group data was particularly useful for devising answer options for multiple choice questions. The cognitive interview findings highlighted the importance of using clear and concise language in each question and prompted changes in question formatting and order.

Conclusion

The questionnaire developed within this study provides basis for further exploration of students' lay consultation networks and may be used in future research on the topic.