Quality and Reliability of Publicly Accessible Information on Laser Treatments for Urinary Incontinence: What is available to our patients?

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Introduction

LASER vaginal treatment is potentially a new and innovative way to treat stress urinary incontinence (SUI), offering women the choice of a minor procedure without the risks associated with regular surgery but its use has not been approved by the FDA nor supported by Canadian and other professional ObGyn societies. Many patients rely on "medical" websites to provide accurate and reliable medical information, which may help them shape their decisions about LASER use.

Objective

To determine the quality and reliability of the top 20 internet search results for laser treatment of SUI.

Methods

An internet search with the most popular search engine, Google, identified the top 20 websites for laser treatment of SUI. Standardized, validated tools for the analysis of website quality, credibility and transparency were used independently by 7 health care workers: DISCERN instrument, JAMA benchmarks and HONcode certification. Readability of the information was assessed using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL) and Automated Readability Index (ARI). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was calculated to document reliability between website assessors.

Results

15/20 websites reviewed were created by private clinics, 2/20 by online newspaper/newsletters, and 3 by laser medical device manufacturers. 0/20 websites met all of the JAMA criteria: 1/20 websites had attained authorship, 1/20 had clear attribution, 0/20 had adequate disclosure and 2/20 achieved currency. 0/20 were HONcode certified. The mean DISCERN score (to determine quality of websites) was 40/80 with the lowest average scores within the DISCERN tool primarily associated with clarity around sources of information, website bias, posting dates, risks of treatment and shared treatment decision making. The ICC was calculated for the DISCERN tool (0.72, 95%CI 0.48-0.87) and JAMA benchmarks (0.85, 95%CI 0.73-0.93). The mean FKGL was "grade 13" (±3.1) and the ARI scores ranged from 7.6 to 22.8 (mean 13.5±3.5).

Conclusions

There is a lack of good quality, reliable and unbiased information available to patients on laser treatment of SUI in the most commonly searched websites. Information is presented at a reading level that is above that of the average reader and may indicate that patients will have trouble comprehending the information.