Epidural Labor Analgesia Information Contained on ‘Popular’ Websites

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Background: More than 70% of women in the US benefit from neuraxial labor analgesia, however most still have strong pre-conceived biases and erroneous knowledge about hospital-based labor analgesia. The internet provides a significant portion of this knowledge as 66% of 2003 searches related to medical information¹. This number is escalating as estimated internet use has grown 100% per year during the 90’s and has currently reached 1.7 billion worldwide. To better understand women’s expectations and knowledge about ‘epidural labor analgesia’, we conducted a search to identify the most popular websites reporting on ‘labor analgesia’ and evaluated their authorship, sources, publishing body, currency and content.

Methods: Using Facebook© we first conducted a survey among nulliparous and parous women (n=12) asking ‘If you were pregnant and wanted information on pain control, what words would you put in your search browser? The 5 most common responses (epidural, pain relief, child birth, pregnancy, labor) were then directly placed into a Google© search browser (Nielsen Netratings #1 search browser with 50% of all activity). The top 3 websites per key word were investigated and their web traffic obtained by implementing Alexa©. Each website was interrogated for origin and structural information. Epidural risks, benefits and placement timing were extracted. Intra-website links were additionally investigated.

Results: 7 websites were analyzed; in order of web traffic popularity these were About.com (#28), Babycenter.com (#389), American Pregnancy Association (#5,839), Pregnancy.org (#54,035), Childbirth.org (#64,130), Epidural FQA. (unranked), and Brigham & Women’s Department of Obstetrics Anesthesia (unranked). Midwives or doulas authored 4 websites, 2 by undefined ‘medical review board’ and 1 by OB anesthesia. Risks and benefits were deemed adequately provided in 4 websites (although 5/7 reported epidurals increase the CS risk, and 6/7 that epidurals prolong labor). 3 websites focused solely on risks (Table). The currency of websites ranged from 1998-2009.

Conclusion: The most visited websites describing epidural labor analgesia are not authored by anesthesiologists nor contain current, updated and accurate information. Our search demonstrated that internet content may have a significant bias against epidural analgesia and may perpetuate erroneous knowledge among expectant mothers (and non-medical providers).


Additional File: