Bridging the Terminology Gap between Health Care Professionals and Patients with the Consumer Health Terminology (CHT)

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Background. The education, economic, cultural, and language differences between patients and health care professionals can be barriers to the process of health information-gathering, management and care. Patients often represent a different perspective from health care professionals on what is important in the health care encounter, and the vocabulary used by laypeople can differ significantly from that of health care professionals even when they are both referring to the same health concept. This summary describes WellMed, Inc.'s Consumer Health Terminology (CHT), which contains more than 20,000 patient-friendly, culture and dialect-specific, self-care, patient complaint, and health risk-oriented terms. These terms have been mapped to SNOMED International and other vocabularies in the UMLS Metathesaurus. The purpose of the CHT is to provide patients a way that they can self-report their information into health management software, as well as import their information from clinical systems in a way that helps to ensure validity and consistency of concepts, as well as to personalize relevant information to the user based on their unique needs.

System. Since July 1998, the consumer terms in the CHT and their mappings to existing controlled vocabulary concepts have been developed by WellMed and its staff of health educators to provide a common terminology foundation for patients and health professionals. Since being deployed in September, 1999, the CHT has been used to help consumers describe their own health risks, document their own health conditions, medications, allergies, test results, surgeries and immunizations in WellMed's Personal Health Manager. The Personal Health Manager is an integrated suite of health management tools for consumers on the Internet. In addition to self-reported profiling by consumers, the CHT also enables the standardized indexing of consumer-oriented health content on the Web, the personalization of health information to consumers based on their unique health characteristics, and the translation of professional health information to more patient-friendly terms.

Evaluation. In the 3 months following launch of the Personal Health Manager, users of the CHT selected a coded health condition from the search results 96% of the time while 85% of medications, 77% of diagnostic tests, 68% of surgeries, and 69% of allergies were entered from coded terms found in the CHT. Further evaluation is needed to determine the reproducibility of these choices, as well as evaluating the clinical validity of the terms that were documented. Consideration is also being made as to whether a single, general consumer vocabulary is as useful as specialty or disease-specific vocabularies (e.g. HIV-AIDS).

Conclusions: With the new Internet-enabled eHealth environment, patients are realizing the promise of access to health records, access to insurance information, access to credible health content, and greater clinical and billing efficiency. In order to enable greater patient participation, however, the words of the patient must be treated with as much respect as the words of the health care professional. WellMed Inc.'s Consumer Health Terminology (CHT) may be able to help bridge the terminology gap between health care professionals and consumers.

References