Availability of COVID-19 information from national plastic surgery society websites

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ABSTRACT

Background

National plastic surgery society websites are an important source of information for patients, family members and healthcare professionals. There are currently no standardized recommendations for the information provided on websites. The aim of this study was to assess the information available on each national plastic surgery society websites on the current pandemic of COVID-19.

Methods

A Google search was performed of United Nations member sovereign states to determine whether they had a national plastic surgery society website and to assess its contents. The presence of COVID-19 information was recorded. Access to contact information, Facebook page, Twitter and Instagram handles were noted.

Results

35% of sovereign states had plastic surgery society websites. 22% of national society websites had a specific COVID-19 section. 14/15 (93%) of these websites had COVID-19-specific guidelines available for health care professionals.

Conclusion

COVID-19 information provided by national plastic surgery society websites is sparse. Two-thirds of national plastic surgery societies do not have a web presence. The availability of COVID-19 clinical guidelines and patient information sheets on national plastic surgery society websites is limited. This study suggests that improvement and increase in COVID-19 information provided by many national plastic surgery society websites is needed.

Key Words: Societies, Medical; Internet; reconstructive surgical procedures; Coronavirus; severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2; COVID-19; Pandemics

Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic situation is unprecedented and challenging.¹ It presents a rapidly evolving set of circumstances, all of which places a strain on our healthcare systems and providers, as well as forcing difficult choices about whether plastic surgical care can and should be delayed or reprioritized.² Given the varying natures of international healthcare systems, conditions differ significantly by locality.^{3,4} Critical decisions concerning the deployment of resources and the management of elective plastic surgical procedures should be made based on institutional policies and recommendations from local, state and federal authorities, considering the availability of finite and essential resources.^{5,6}

National plastic surgery societies are seen as reliable sources of information.⁷ Their websites should be easily accessible and provide clinical information and guidelines needs to meet local and national standards.^{7,8} To help plastic stay informed during this rapidly evolving situation, national plastic surgery societies may gather COVID-19 resources to provide materials that are more specific to plastic surgeons, including information for practice management, patient safety, policy changes around coding and regulation, and ongoing advocacy efforts.^{7,8} No studies have assessed the information available on national plastic surgery societies websites.⁹ The aim of this study is to evaluate each national plastic surgery society website for availability of COVID-19 information.

Methods

A Google search was performed of United Nations member sovereign states to determine whether they had a national plastic surgery society website and to assess its contents. This was performed by two independent reviewers on 28th March 2020. The presence of COVID-19 information was recorded. Access to contact information, Facebook page, Twitter and Instagram handles were noted. The Google search engine with the search terms 'plastic surgery' or 'reconstructive surgery' and 'society OR association' and '(Name of nation of interest)'. Each website was assessed for the presence of a COVID-19 information, clinical practice guidelines and links. It was further evaluated for social media accounts.

Results

There are 193 United Nations member sovereign states. 67 (35%) of national plastic surgery societies had a website. COVID-19 was mentioned in 15/67 (22%) of those national plastic surgery society websites; of which 14/15 (93%) of societies advised to provide only urgent or emergent care and 1/15 (7%) had a failed link to news of its national hand society warning of an increase in hand injuries during quarantine. 6/15 (40%) provided their state's directives to provide only urgent or emergent care and 1/15 (7%) recommended following World Health Organization guidelines.

Discussion

This is the first study to evaluate the website information provided by national plastic surgery societies. The presence of COVID-19 information on national plastic surgery websites is

sparse with two-thirds of sovereign nations not represented. There was no integration between national plastic surgery websites other than to conferences and courses.

General search engines are by far the most popular means for locating medical information but are often not oriented to providing accurate information for the layperson.¹⁰ A good national plastic society website makes recommendation easier for its members. There are guidelines detailing how a website should be structured to help with ease of reading and navigation.⁹ We used Google as the search engine of choice given that over 70% of web users worldwide use it as their primary search engine.¹⁰ In the internet era, plastic surgeons will look to their national plastic societies for COVID-19 information which makes reliable online information ever more critical.^{8,11-13} This leaves a shortfall in potential plastic surgery education and best standard of care.¹¹⁻¹⁵ The Cochrane review group provide specific guidelines based on evidence. Guidelines can be helpful in summarizing evidence, standardizing management and guiding appropriate referrals.^{8,11-15} We found that none of the national plastic societies' websites provided paediatric COVID-19 surgical guidelines for clinicians.

Certain national societies have social media accounts. Two aspects to health care professionals' internet use are information gathering and social networking. Social media groups provide social support and allow communication. Social media can be used to improve the communication between national plastic surgery societies and plastic surgeons. It is important to acknowledge that confidentiality is an issue when discussing plastic in surgery in social media.^{9,10}

This is the first study to evaluate the availability of information on the COVID-19 disease pandemic provided by national plastic surgery society websites. This information is limited.

There is minimal integration and standardization between websites, governing bodies and plastic surgical societies. In an increasingly technological health system, where the internet and communication play a crucial role, it is essential that this deficiency be addressed. This highlights the opportunity for collaboration between national plastic surgery societies to standardize the information and quality of care provided to clinicians.^{8, 11-13} A limitation of this study is that it could not evaluate if direct information was provided by the leadership directly to their society members, e.g. by letter or email.

It is necessary that national plastic surgery societies provide their members with the most current, complete, and accurate expert information to use in making decisions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and care for plastic surgery patients.^{8,13,16} Making efforts to appropriately provide COVID-19 information will lead to great benefits such as increased knowledge, prevention of further infections and coping strategies of patients and health care professionals.^{8,13,16}

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ACCEPTED

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