

# Web Médica Acreditada Guidelines: Reliability and Quality of Health Information on Spanish-Language Websites

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## Abstract

*The number of websites providing health information and services on the Internet increases day by day. The quality of these websites is very variable and difficult to assess. There are many self-regulatory initiatives in the English-speaking world to develop quality and ethical standards for health information on the Internet, but few similar Spanish-language initiatives have emerged whilst some studies suggest that quality standards are lower in the Spanish-language sites. A Spanish initiative to improve the quality of these websites would, therefore, seem to be a very important initiative. In Spain, Web Médica Acreditada (WMA) is an initiative to develop quality and ethical standards for health information. The aim of these standards is to improve websites providing such health related-content and services. In this article we present the WMA Guidelines and explain how WMA applies its quality criteria. Quality of Internet health information is essential because it has the potential to benefit or harm a large number of people and it is therefore essential to provide consumers with some tools to aid them in assessing the nature of the information they are accessing and how they should use it without jeopardizing their relationship with their doctor.*

## Keywords:

Internet standards; Health care quality; Ethics; Quality assurance; Guidelines; Spanish

## 1. Introduction

The number of websites providing health information and services on the Internet increases constantly, from day to day. It is known that the quality of these websites is very variable and difficult to assess; we can find websites established by government institutions, consumer and scientific organizations, patients' associations, personal webs, health provider institutions, commercial sites, etc. On the other hand, patients continue to look for new ways of accessing health information and their physicians [1, 2] and more than four in ten health seekers say the material they find affects their decisions about their own health [3]. Thus the choice of appropriate evaluation criteria for the information is both crucial and challenging. There is no consensus, however, on how to resolve this problem. Some Codes of Conduct around the world seek to establish standards of quality in the accreditation of health-related web contents. [4-12]. There are many self-regulatory initiatives in the English-speaking world to develop quality and ethical standards for health information on the Internet, but there is little knowledge about Spanish-speaking initiatives. More

information is needed, but it seems that it is more difficult to find complete and more accurate information about health problems on Spanish-language Websites. [13]

Web Médica Acreditada (WMA) [14], a Metges on line project, is an initiative launched by the Medical Association of Barcelona (COMB) [15], Spain. In Spain, Medical Associations are public institutions with a legally established mission to represent medical practitioners as a whole. The Medical Association of Barcelona is a Spanish organization established over one hundred years ago to defend the interests of the medical profession. It was also founded to ensure that the medical profession adheres to ethical and scientific norms in order to offer the best healthcare services to society. In reality, then, its real concern is with the consumer. Web Médica Acreditada was set up to develop quality and ethical standards for health information. The aim of applying these standards is to improve websites providing health related-content and services.

## **2. Context**

At first, WMA focused on local websites in Barcelona, but there are now accredited medical websites all over Spain and even in South America. It is for this reason that we can rightly claim that ours is now a national or even international initiative.

In 1999, when WMA was launched, no international standards of quality criteria existed for evaluating health-related websites, and no such initiative existed for Spanish-language websites either. However, the sheer quantity of health-related information available on the Internet makes it essential to establish the accessibility, quality and reading grade level of such health information.

Internet use in Spain lagged behind other European countries at first, but all that is changing now. Something similar is happening in South American countries, but there are still more than 300 million potential Spanish-speaking users of Internet and its services, including many users looking for websites with health related information.

According to a report on the use of new technologies (Ministry of Health) [16] in Spain, less than 40% of Internet users turn to Internet sources to seek health information. In the space of just five years, there has been a significant increase in the growth rate of Internet users, probably due to decrease in cost. In May 2004, according to the General Media Study (Estudio General de Medios), 33.1% of Spaniards aged 14 or over were Internet users, compared to 4.8% in May 1998 [17].

In other countries, Internet users have made it clear that privacy is one of their prime concerns. According to another report, the first question that worried users was speed of connection and quality of telephone connection (in third place was advertisement and cost and in seventh place confidentiality).

More than 50% of users have never bought anything on the Internet.

We should take into account the fact that 50% of the users surveyed under this report were university students and only 20% could read and speak English fluently, whilst 30% read and speak a little and 50% had significant difficulties with English. So it is important to implement some quality initiatives in these environments within the Spanish-speaking world. It is interesting to note that, unlike other international initiatives, WMA focuses its activities only on websites that come under the direct responsibility of a medical doctor, applying Spanish ethical and legal Internet guidelines to this professional work.

## **3. Web Médica Acreditada Guidelines**

This code was created by the Medical Association of Barcelona, Spain and launched in 1999. The process of accreditation is essentially simple and is based on the application of

quality standards (see Figure 1). These standards are used to accredit the consumer-oriented websites of health care organizations. The WMA organizational structure is based on a Standing Committee and a Delegate Commission that award accreditation once websites have adapted to the WMA's recommendations. We have a multidisciplinary staff formed by physicians, lawyers, an ethics team, computer science personnel and web designers.

The WMA accreditation process is as follows:

1. The person in charge of a website sends a (voluntary) request to the WMA website in order to begin the process. Using the online application form, the person in charge provides certain information for the WMA and auto-checks the WMA criteria (based on the Code of Conduct and the Ethical Code) (step/level1) to express acceptance of these recommendations;
2. The Standing Committee assesses the website based on the WMA criteria (step/level 2/ medical expert);
3. WMA sends a report to the person in charge, who implements the recommendations;
4. When the recommendations are implemented, it is possible to obtain the seal of approval and WMA sends an html seal code to be posted on the accredited website, as well as adding its name and URL to the index of accredited websites.

At the moment, the accreditation process is free of charge.

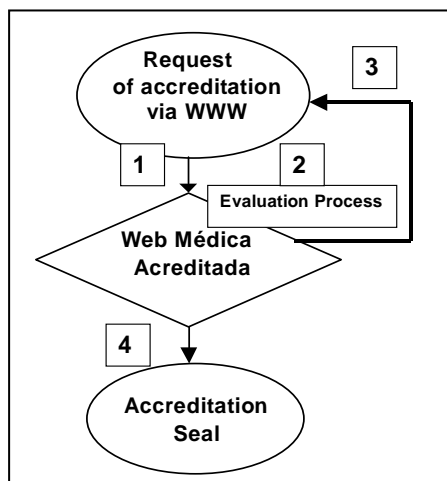


Figure 1 - Accreditation Process

There are at present 316 accredited websites with more than 100 in the process of obtaining accreditation. They include biomedical associations, patients' associations, medical institutions, scientific societies, conferences and personal medical websites. Only 10% were accredited without changes. More than 40% of these websites have been awarded other seals of approval.

### 3.1. Quality standards (see Table 1)

These standards are based on the Code of Conduct and on the Ethics Code of the Council of Medical Associations of Catalonia.

### 3.2. Code of Conduct Criteria

#### 3.2.1. Identification

- Ownership (institutions and professional or health professionals, including information about membership of medical associations, medical specialization and

professional activity and, if possible, a brief résumé including most significant training and professional experience). If the website offers any kind of online consultation, it is necessary to identify all the professionals involved.

- Address and contact e-mail placed in a clear and prominent place on the website (it is recommended that this place should be on the homepage). This email address allows visitors to request information or send in queries about any issue relating the website.

*Table 1 - Code of Conduct Criteria*

- Identification
- Contents
- Confidentiality
- Control and validation
- Advertising and Founding
- Virtual Consultation
- Non compliance

### *3.2.2. Contents*

- Informative content must include the author, a bibliography and the dates of both initial publication and any subsequent updates.
- It is always advisable to include the date of any updates made to the website. Although this date does not give visitors a clear indication as to when the website was last updated, it does provide a general idea. This date should preferably appear on the homepage.
- In the same way, references should be provided for content from other sources, and the Internet address of the organization or document should be cited whenever possible.
- The website should be structured in such a way as to permit easy access to the different sections within the website as well as to external websites.
- All links on the website that lead to external sources must indicate destination. Whenever possible, it is advisable that a small text be included alongside the link with a brief description of the source.

### *3.2.3. Confidentiality*

Websites must abide by principles of confidentiality and secrecy in all matters concerning data and information sent or provided by patients by Internet.

### *3.2.4. Control and validation*

Websites that have received the Seal are listed on the Certified Medical website section. The WMA site includes a link to a Control e-mailbox, which is addressed to the standing committee. Any visitor to the web can use it to confirm the authenticity of a certification and obtain more information from WMA.

### *3.2.5. Advertising and Founding*

It is a requirement that advertising material, in whatever format, included within a website that holds the Certified Medical Website Seal, should be distinguished from informative material. This can be done through the use of electronic advertising applications such as fixed or movable banners or by simply specifying it. If the websites financed either completely or partially through a sponsor, the sponsor must be clearly displayed in a prominent location on the website.

### 3.2.6. *Virtual Consultation*

- **E-mail from a known patient:** This is a medical consultation made by e-mail to a trusted physician by a known patient. The patient is currently under the physician's care, so the patient's clinical record is open and active. The consultation is about some aspect of the current treatment. This form of consultation is acceptable since it is just another form of the doctor-patient relationship and the physician's response to the patient's consultation is considered appropriate since it is only an extension of the medical care or treatment.
- **Unsolicited e-mail:** In these cases, a physician receives the consultation from an unknown person who requests customized and/or generalized information for patients or relatives of patients who generally have a chronic disease. It is important to note that the response, could lead to a series of implications (ethical and/or medical-legal). It is therefore advisable that the physician be prudent and careful.

### 3.2.7. *Non compliance*

If these norms are not complied with, the COMB reserves the right to withdraw the Certified Medical Website Seal awarded without prejudice to any liabilities that, in accordance with the prevailing norm, may derive from this non-compliance.

## 4. **Conclusions**

WMA and all quality initiatives must continue to work on developing new criteria and tools to adapt to the changes brought about by Internet, and to cooperate with scientific and consumer associations. Since March 2002, WMA has taken part in the European Union MedCIRCLE [18] project, which is a collaboration of trusted European health subject gateways, medical associations and accreditation, certification and rating services which all share the common goal of evaluating, describing or annotating health information using a common metadata language. HIDDEL (Health Information Disclosure, Description and Evaluation Language) is the language used to express ratings in a machine-processable XML/RDF format. A combination of quality seals and metadata expressed in RDF format (a standard for developing the Semantic Web) can provide a tool as well as presenting a new challenge and an opportunity to help consumers to identify high quality, trustworthy health resources on the Web. [19, 20]

It seems necessary to offer consumers, users and professionals certain quality standards in order to improve health-related websites on the Internet and the services they offer [21]. It is important to inform consumers about the meaning of the seal, and the scope, limits, risks and expectations associated with the use of health Internet services. It is also important that the information found on the Internet should be made easier to understand as well as to improve health education in general. Quality of Internet health information is essential because it has the potential to benefit or harm a large number of people [5]. It is therefore essential to provide consumers with tools to aid them in assessing the nature of the information they are accessing [22] and how they should use it without jeopardizing their relationship with their doctor. WMA, as a Spanish-speaking initiative, could provide a reference point for the Spanish-language community (Spain and Latin America) and could facilitate cooperation and coordination with other international language initiatives.

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