



Internet, Hypochondriasis and Doctor Shopping: A Triad of Modern Healthcare Challenge

Jain S and Bargayary H*

Department of Community Medicine, Lala Lajpat Rai Memorial Medical College, India

*Corresponding author: Harimu Bargayary, Department of Community Medicine, Lala Lajpat Rai Memorial Medical College, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India, 250004, Email: harimu.bargayary.hb@gmail.com

Received Date: January 06, 2025; Published Date: January 10, 2025

Abstract

Hypochondriasis or illness anxiety disorder, coupled with unrestricted access to abundant information from the internet can sensationalize the doctor shopping behaviour among the hypochondriac patients. This triad can be a challenge to the modern healthcare system by leading to unnecessary increase in healthcare burden and can disrupt doctor-patient relationship as it leads to development of mistrust towards the healthcare providers. Internet can worsen the anxiety among the patients, escalating fears and can take toll over the patient's mental well-being. In addition to this, another major problem arising from this triad is the disruption in treatment. Hence, understanding and addressing this triad is pivotal not only for patient well-being but also for the sustainability and effectiveness of healthcare systems.

Keywords: Hypochondriasis; Illness Anxiety Disorder; Cyberchondria; Doctor Shopping; Polypharmacy; Mental Health

Abbreviations

IAD: Illness Anxiety Disorder; SSD: Somatic Symptom Disorder; SNRI: Serotonin and Norepinephrine Reuptake Inhibitor; AMR: Anti-Microbial Resistance; ICT: Information and Communication Technology; AETCOM: Attitude, Ethics and Communication.

Introduction

In the era of digital transformation, hypochondriasis in an individual exacerbated with cyberchondria may have emerged as a complex challenge for healthcare professionals. Clinically, hypochondriasis also known as illness anxiety disorder (IAD) or somatic symptom disorder (SSD) is characterized by patients who do not have serious organic disease but are still convinced that they have a disease

that is yet-to-be-diagnosed [1]. This circumstance can lead the hypochondriacs to internet searches regarding their suspected medical condition, a clinical phenomenon known as cyberchondria, resulting in triggered anxiety about their health [2]. Adding to the issue is the phenomenon of doctor shopping, a hallmark behaviour among individuals with hypochondriasis. Doctor-shopping is defined as visiting multiple doctors or physicians in a variety of medical specialties with the same health problem [3], often in search of diagnosis that aligns with their beliefs.

Impacts on Healthcare System

- **Health-care burden:** These patients can be a time-consuming challenge to the clinicians [2]. The increased utilization and unnecessary exhaustion of resources may divert attention from patients who need urgent or

actual care.

- **Erosion of trust:** Unmet expectations of the patient often lead to disappointment and frustration leading to development of mistrust towards healthcare provider, thus, impacting doctor-patient relationship [3].

Doctor shopping impact on individual's health

- **Iatrogenic harm:** Overlapping prescriptions, overmedication arising from polypharmacy, unnecessary tests and procedures driven by the patient's insistence can lead to iatrogenic harm.
- Reduced effective and efficient treatment.
- Increased cost of treatment and reduced continuity of care [3].

Internet and Hypochondriasis

Individuals with hypochondriasis characterized by frequent anxiety of having a perceived non-existent illness among themselves when gets access to the vast ocean of health information from the internet, the overabundance of unvetted information often fuels up the existing anxiety, escalating fears, leading to self-diagnosis and further doctor shopping.

Certain misinformation can sometime validate their unfounded fears, further entrenching their beliefs and may influence their mental well-being.

Impact on treatment adherence

The interplay between the internet, hypochondriasis and doctor shopping often results in treatment interruptions. A real-time example of where a typical hypochondriac patient presenting with non-organic somatic symptoms was prescribed Duloxetine (SNRI drug) alongside others. The patient googles all the drugs to see if they meet the criteria with her presented symptoms and reads Duloxetine as a drug for depression and anxiety, which according to the patient is not an issue with her and therefore discontinues the drug and looks for another consultation with a different doctor.

This premature abandonment of prescribed treatments swayed by anecdotal online evidence and being skeptical of their physician's reassurances can prolong suffering, delay recovery and complicate further interventions. This type of non-adherence to treatment can also lead to Anti-Microbial Resistance (AMR) apart from other causes.

Addressing the Triad: A Way Forward

- Developing one platform mobile application by harnessing information and communication technology (ICT) that could provide accurate and authentic health information.
- Normalizing mental health conditions and not viewing it as a societal taboo.
- Implementation of laws and legislation strictly for the unregulated web content.
- Involvement of physicians in actively guiding patients towards credible sources.
- Building trust through empathetic communication thus establishing a strong therapeutic alliance with such patients is of paramount importance.
- Attitude, Ethics and Communication (AETCOM) module in medical curriculum must be implemented strictly to build efficient future professional physicians.
- Provision of collaborative care through multidisciplinary approach involving mental health professionals, general physicians and counsellors to address the psychological and physical dimensions of hypochondriasis.

Conclusion

The convergence of internet, hypochondriasis and doctor shopping triad presents a formidable challenge in modern medicine. By building trust, utilising technology responsibly and supporting comprehensive care, the medical community can address the disruptive behaviours that accompany with illness anxiety disorder. Overcoming this triad is essential not only for patient well-being but also for preserving the integrity and efficiency of healthcare systems.

References

1. Mobley D, Baum NH, Beattie A, Nemeroff C (2019) When Imagination Becomes a Disease: Dealing With Hypochondriacal Patients in Clinical Practice. *Ochsner J* 19(2): 70-73.
2. Brittany MM, Aaron MN, Nicholas PA, Brian JA, Norman BS (2018) Cyberchondria: Overlap with health anxiety and unique relations with impairment, quality of life, and service utilization. *Psychiatry Research* 261: 204-211.
3. Biernikiewicz M, Taieb V, Toumi M (2019) Characteristics of doctor-shoppers: a systematic literature review. *J Mark Access Health Policy* 7(1): 1595953.