

# Pharmaceuticals, the Internet and the Informed Consumer

Dr Nick Fox  
University of Sheffield

# Background

- Government initiative: the Expert Patient
- Internet is a means to disseminate information about pharmaceutical products and to consume them, trans-nationally
- Development of 'lifestyle drugs'
- Expert patient or Informed Consumer?

# Research Methods

- Two-year study
- Qualitative data
- ‘Online ethnography’ of web discussion groups, including online and telephone interviews with participants
- Three case studies: obesity, erectile dysfunction, ‘pro-anorexia’

# Case 1: X-Online

- Web group devoted to weight loss among obese and overweight
- Supports use of orlistat (Xenical)
- 495 users: mostly female, age 30 to 40, from UK, US and Australia
- Promotes managed weight loss

# Information Exchange

- ‘Must say the first couple days on X I have passed wind a lot and burped plus I don’t eat large amounts of food yet my stomach feels full to the point of being very uncomfortable...Anyway any info you guys can pass on would be much appreciated’ (Jane)
- ‘When is the best time to take the X pill? Before you eat? During your meal (which is what I've been doing) or at the end of your meal? What gives you the ‘most’ out of the pill?’ (Clare)

# Becoming Expert

- ‘My reaction to the suggestion to go on Xenical was to do all the research I could first. I was totally prepared for all the side-effects that I might experience... The research I did was on the Internet mainly...I actually found the X-Online group during that research as I was looking for feedback from people who had taken it. I probably looked into it for three weeks or so before actually going to my own doctor for a prescription.’ (Gemma)

# Adopting the Medical Model

- Members were committed to weight loss
- Most participants equated a healthy lifestyle with slimness
- Julie accepted the notion that weight gain was associated with illness and saw losing weight as a route to a healthy life-style.
- Gemma revealed that she wanted to have children and believed that being overweight would lead to a difficult and unhealthy pregnancy.

# Conclusion: An Expert Patient

- Becoming an expert patient appears as a radical, democratising process, giving the patient influence over treatment options.
- However, by using Xenical to ‘treat’ weight gain and ‘normalise’ the body, the users accepted and perpetuated a biomedical perspective that a ‘faulty body’ could be ‘treated’.



## Case 2: Viagra Forum

- Independent forum devoted to use of sildenafil (Viagra) for erectile dysfunction
- 102 members
- Advice on the use of Viagra and related information about male and female 'sexual dysfunction'
- Buying guide for online purchase

# Medical Use of Viagra

- ‘I buy my viagra via the internet, and I have had no concerns. It's fast, easy and cheaper than the local pharmacy. I have ED all the time, as defined as the inability to achieve or maintain an erection. Does that mean do I always take a viagra before I engage in sexual activity? No I don't, because I engage my wife in some sort of sexual activity almost every day. She demands and deserves my physical attention. But when we want sustained intercourse, I take viagra. That's maybe once or twice a week on average’. (Online interview)

# Medical/Recreational Use

- ‘I have been having erection problems for about a year due to high blood pressure and prescription drugs. My doctor gave me the sample pack of Viagra. The first time I took a 25 mg pill I got semi-hard after 30 minutes. After stimulation from my wife I got hard as a rock. We had sex for almost an hour doing various positions. I felt like I was 16 again. Even after ejaculation I still stayed hard. We did it twice after that. I have never performed like that in our 24 years of marriage!’

# In search of 'cyborg sexuality'

- 'I'm 25 and have no problem getting and maintaining an erection through ejaculation. Problem is, this happens a bit quick and I need to recover quickly to keep the [girlfriend] happy. My recovery time is about 45 minutes. Will a 50mg prescription help me out in this department? Will it shorten the recovery time assuming proper stimulation and will the successive encounters continue to be as powerful as the first one?' (Post to forum)

# In search of 'cyborg sexuality'

- 'Now i realise this great medicine should not be abused and I don't want to start any competitions but can i just say that after sneaking off with a long time friend of mine for a enjoyable weekend, i racked up 12 hours of non stop action on day one, 16 hours on day two and only 4 hours on day three due to the fact my supply had run out ( I ate 8 of those blue M&M`s that weekend ).The only side affects i suffered was the fact I tore all my stomach muscles and could not walk or laugh for 3 days'. (Post to forum)

# Conclusion: expert patient or informed consumer?

- The viagra board serves as an information resource, a means to obtain the drug without prescription and a forum for exploring the drug's potential for recreational enhancement
- Medical model: treatment for a sexual dysfunction
- Consumer model: medical technology can create a 'cyborg sexuality'
- Expertise reflects both medical model and informed consumption of pharmaceutical technology

## Case 3: Anagrrl pro-anorexia site

- Anagrrl and other groups use Internet to support those with anorexia and advocate anti-recovery and safety
- Support use of weight loss drugs to sustain anorectic condition
- Mostly UK, US and Australian users, predominantly female, aged 17-20

# An anti-medical model

- ‘I think of my ed [eating disorder] as a sanctuary from the pain that I've lived through. I have control over myself when I restrict, and I have control over my body when I purge and that is what has got me through the hard times’. (Jenny)
- ‘I don't agree with promoting or encouraging anorexic tendencies at all. however, I do agree with giving anorexics a place to go, a place to find support and learn about the disorder. This way hopefully everyone will know how to do this as healthy as possible’.



# Using Pharmaceuticals

- ‘Personally, I like the diet pill Xenadrine. I really liked the one with ephedrine it, but now its hard to find since ephedrine is so bad for you. But yeah, they work really really well’. (Emily)
- ‘I've been searching around diet pills I can get here in the UK, especially from GNC because I live in a flat above one, and I noticed these. They're the Xenadrine without ephedrine. Does anyone use them? What results have they experienced?’ (Elizabeth)

# Conclusion: Autonomous Consumers

- By becoming experts in anorexia, participants reject a medical model of the disease
- They use a range of techniques including weight-loss drugs to sustain low weight.
- Users are informed, autonomous consumers of drugs, which have been subverted from their intended purpose and context.

# Discussion

- These groups reflect different priorities and values:
  - a medicalised desire to treat ‘abnormality’
  - a partly de-medicalised ‘cyborg’ sexuality
  - anti-medical uses of drugs as informed and autonomous consumers
- The Internet facilitates a variety of expertise from medicalised to autonomous

# Pharmaceuticals, the Internet and the Informed Consumer

Dr Nick Fox  
University of Sheffield