

Online health information seeking behavior by patients prior to their outpatient appointments in endocrinology

Angelos Kyriacou^{1,2,3}, Cathy Sherratt¹

¹Postgraduate Medical Institute, Faculty of Health & Social Care, Edge Hill University, UK ²Evangelismos Hospital, Paphos, Cyprus ³CEDM Centre of Endocrinology, Diabetes & Metabolism, Limassol, Cyprus

Introduction

Online health information (OHI) seeking is increasingly popular and may enhance patient empowerment. OHI seeking behavior has never been studied in the field of endocrinology. We therefore examined the frequency, how and why OHI is sought, the impact of such activity and future information needs.

Methods

A questionnaire survey was employed amongst patients attending a general endocrinology clinic. Mixed-methods approach (QUAN+qual); using quantitative data (statistical analysis) merged with qualitative data (thematic analysis) to achieve triangulation. Ethical approval by Edge Hill University, UK (FOHS176); Bioethics Committee of Cyprus was also formally consulted

Results

From 398 patients that fulfilled the inclusion criteria 312 agreed to participate (response rate=78.4%); 80.4% were women. The internet was by far the commonest source of information (175, 56.1% of the whole cohort & 78.1% of health information seeker subgroup). 40% relied on websites that were provided as first options by their search engine. 30.9% reported awareness of website certification tools (e.g. HONcode). Only 25.7% of OHI seekers discussed their gathered OHI with their endocrinologist and only 18.3% of patients reported their health information needs are well met by using the internet.

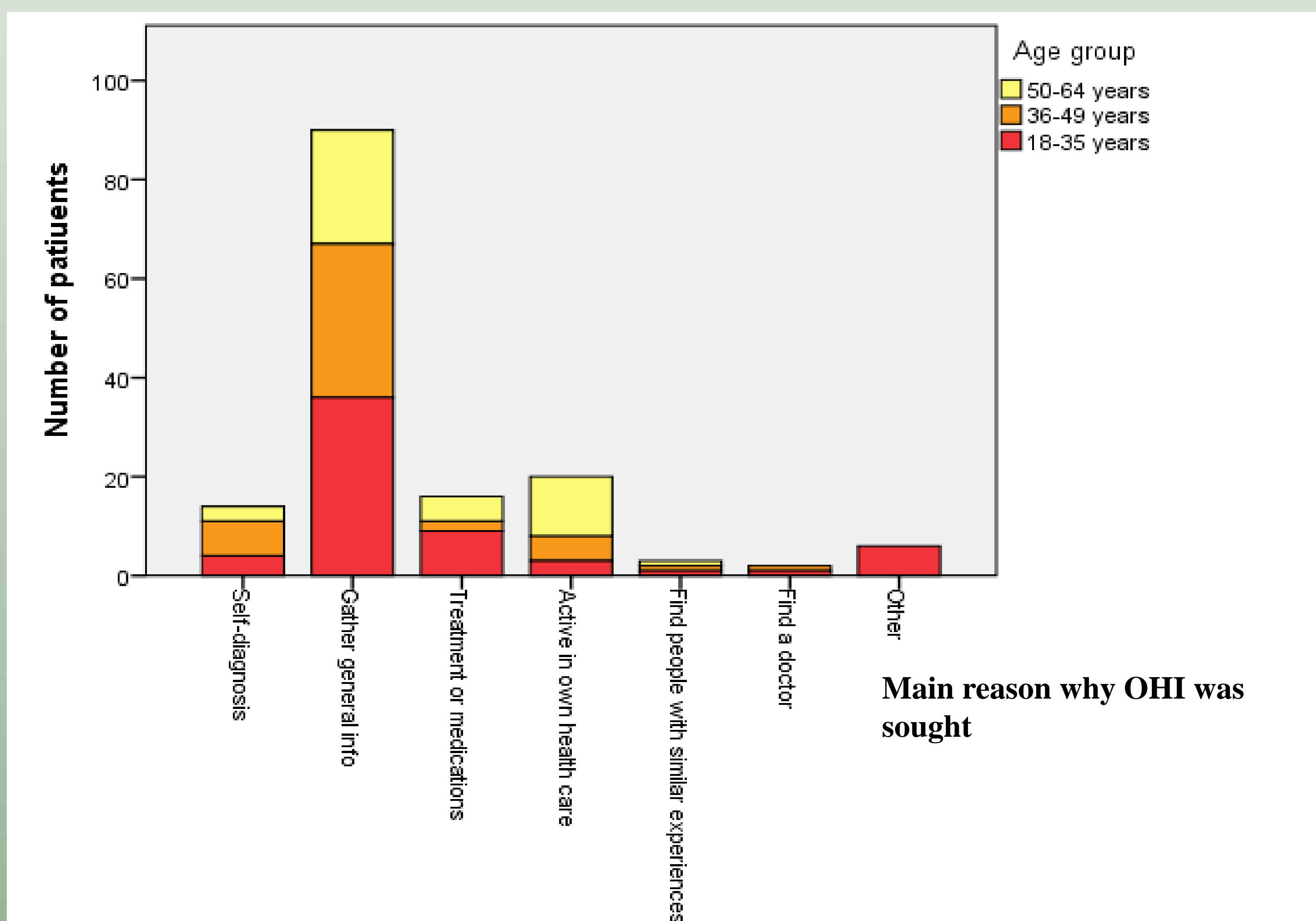


Figure 1. Reasons for utilizing the internet for health-information gathering

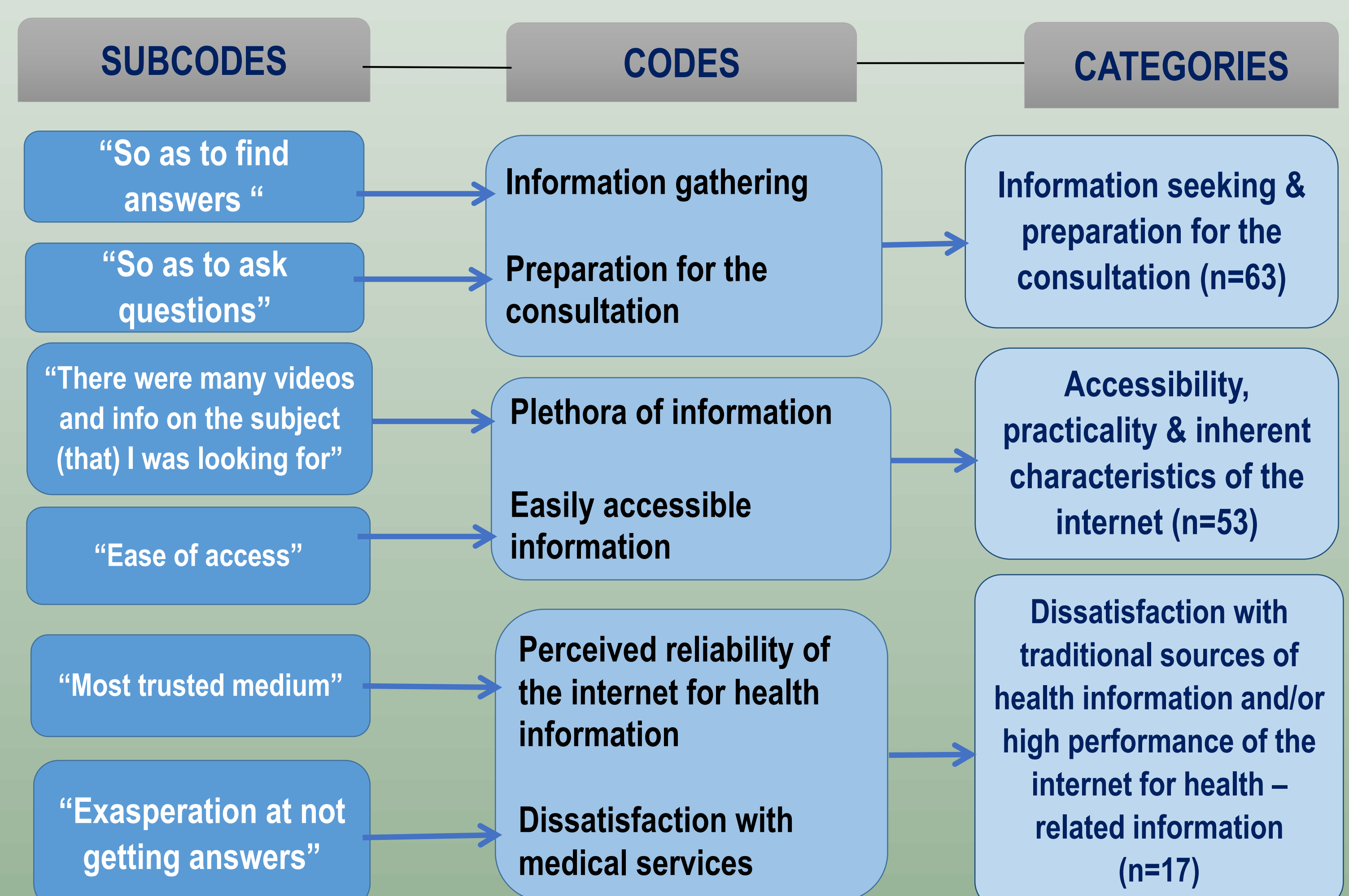


Figure 2. Why online health information was sought prior to the consultation

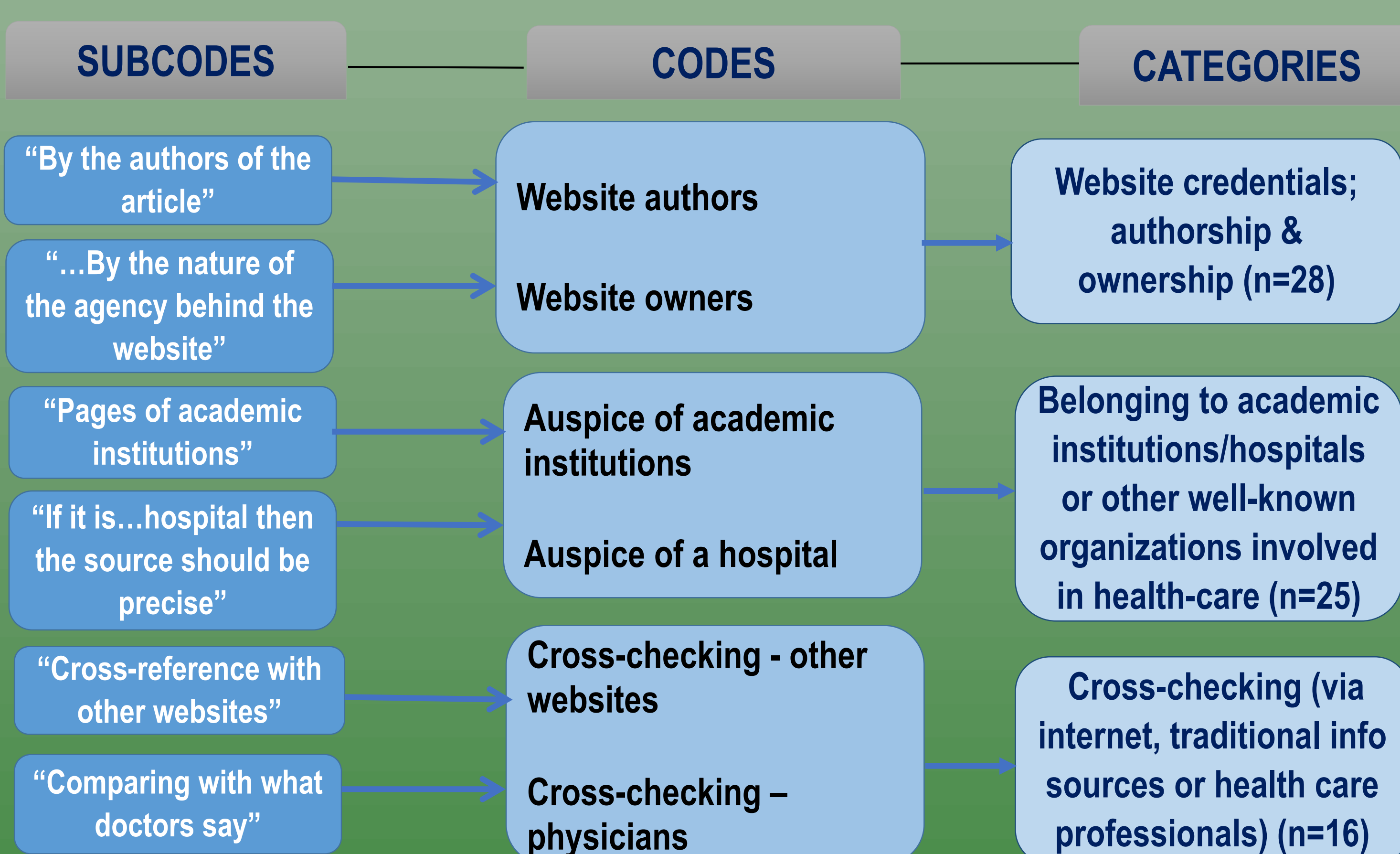


Figure 3. How do patients check whether a website has trustworthy information

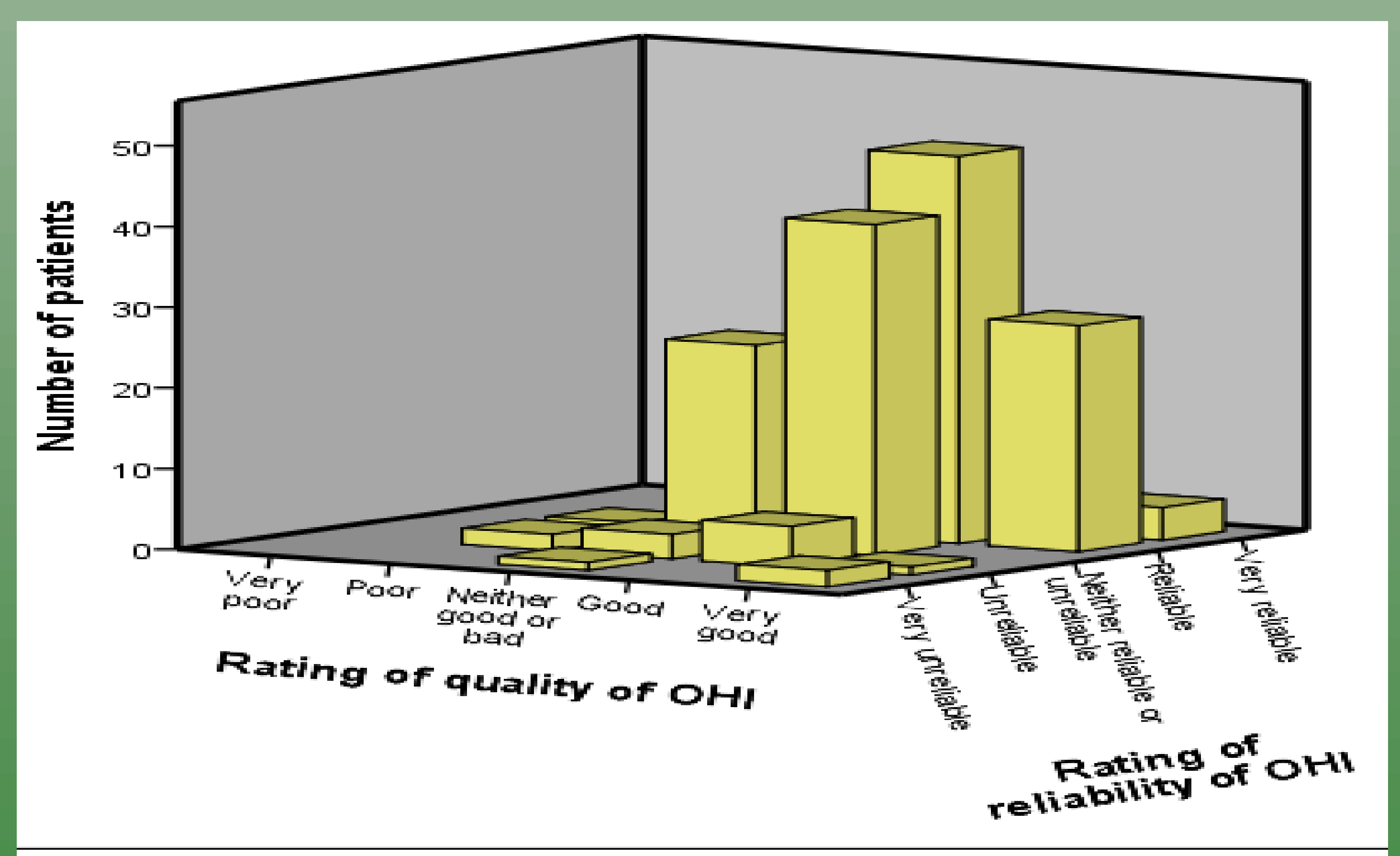


Figure 4. Perceived quality and reliability of online health information

Conclusions: The majority of endocrinology patients practice OHI seeking prior to their appointments. Most perceive OHI as being good quality and reliable and they appear to have reasonable awareness of how to identify websites with trustworthy information. If an interactive e-learning module was available, about three quarters of OHI-seekers and up to half of the non-OHI seekers would be keen to utilize it. Our data should not only reassure endocrinologists that there is nothing to be feared by their patients seeking OHI, but should provide an evidence-base to encourage patients to discuss any gathered OHI with them. We also argue that endocrinologists need to become 'internet prescribers', i.e. to recommend reliable OHI sources.