

ISSUE BRIEF

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1 – 2005

URAC WEB SITE ACCREDITATION REVIEW ANSWERS THE QUESTION: *What's Wrong With This Web Site?*

Case Example:

Primary health information portal for large hospital cooperative

- 70 percent of contact email addresses published in clinical trials section was invalid or incorrect.
- Data feed for licensed content was 60 percent misaligned, resulting in hyperlinks pointing to incorrect articles. For instance, a hyperlink to “colic” linked to an albinism article, and a “childhood biting” hyperlink pointed to an article for herpes.
- Users did not have access to ability to change, update, or delete personal health information on file.

Case Example:

Health Insurer covering 8 million lives in nine states

- Three separate IE security alert errors popped up during member sign-up indicating insecure environment, data transmissions and incorrect security certificates.
- No established, HIPAA consistent policies and procedures for safeguarding personal health information.
- Self assessment tools did not have information about their scientific basis.

URAC Health Web Site Accreditation Tames Internet's Wild, Wild West

About 93 million Americans (eight out of 10 adult Internet users) have searched for at least one popular health topic online. We go online to research a diagnosis or a prescription, to prepare for surgery or to find out how to recover faster, and to seek emotional support from others suffering from the same illness. But with literally tens of millions of health information sites on the World Wide Web, finding credible, timely health information online is a roll of the dice, even from a trusted source such as a hospital system or health insurer.

Chaos and inconsistency in the world of consumer health information is counterproductive for Donald W. Kemper, chairman and CEO of Healthwise, the highly-respected and well-used source of consumer health information. Kemper launched his Healthwise™ Knowledgebase electronic health information tool in 1996, and has staked his reputation on the consumer health content his company has produced since 1975. As founding chair of the Center for Information Therapy, Kemper has elevated the value of providing “prescription-strength information” to consumers to a new level, passionately promoting his vision for self-care and medical consumerism around the world.

“On the Internet, we need a squeaky-clean reputation,” said Kemper, who helped spearhead the effort leading to URAC’s Health Web Site Accreditation, the only web site accrediting program of its kind in the world. Since its launch in 2001, URAC has given its seal of approval to some 50 accredited health web sites and 300 portals including WebMD, Healthwise, National Institutes of

Health, National Library of Medicine, KidsHealth and Consumer Health Interactive.

Kemper recalled that the genesis of web site accreditation was spurred by a handful of definitive articles in The New York Times published in 1999 which called into question what everyone in the web-based health information arena already knew: the Internet was a modern frontier with few rules and no sheriffs.

“In those days it was sort of a wild, wild West in a lot of ways,” Kemper said. “People saw the opportunities that the Internet could offer, but we really didn’t have any rules in place. Those articles were a wake-up call that the industry needed to create some rules of fair play for itself.”

An Aug. 31, 1999 article in The New York Times entitled, “The Health Hazards of Point-and-Click Medicine,” called the nation’s attention to “scores of misleading, inaccurate ‘facts’ about cancer and other diseases – references accessible in moments to anyone with a computer and an Internet connection.” The story outlined the results of studies of Internet health information sites done by the University of Michigan and Ohio State University College of Medicine and Public Health, revealing that many sites offered information that was not peer-reviewed and did not cite specific research or sources—and much was in error or outdated. Because of the nature of the Internet, there was no clear way for consumers to determine what information was accurate and what information was “garbage, just garbage.”

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Just a few days later, The New York Times featured a page one story questioning the web ethics of one of the nation’s most respected physicians, former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop.

HI-ETHICS SETS 14 ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR OFFERING INTERNET HEALTH SERVICES TO CONSUMERS

In May, 2000, the membership of Hi-Ethics set 14 principles for health web sites, demonstrating a commitment to ensure that “consumers can realize the full benefits of the Internet to improve their health and that of their families.” The principles can be found at www.hiethics.com and govern the following:

1. Privacy policies
2. Enhanced privacy protection for health-related personal information
3. Safeguarding consumer privacy in relationships with third parties
4. Disclosure of ownership and financial sponsorship
5. Identifying advertising and health information content sponsored by third parties
6. Promotional offers, rebates, and free items or services
7. Quality of health information content
8. Authorship and accountability
9. Disclosure of source and validation for self-assessment tools
10. Professionalism in the online environment
11. Qualifications of those responsible for health care services delivered via the web site
12. Transparency of interactions, candor and trustworthiness
13. Disclosure of limitations of the site as a source of health care services
14. Mechanism for consumer feedback concerning the web site

The article, “Hailed as a Surgeon General, Koop Is Faulted on Web Ethics,” forced Koop to respond to ethical charges that he and his consumer health information website, DrKoop.com, had “frequently blurred the line between its objective information and its advertising or promotional content, and that his ties to business have not been properly disclosed.”

At the invitation of Koop himself, Kemper met with the leaders of other well-respected health content websites in September 1999 to discuss the creation of a set of rules “that would really help people gain trust in the information they found on the Internet, so the web could fulfill the potential that we all believed in,” he said. “We all saw that there was an opportunity to create a legacy, something that could have lasting value.”

What resulted was the creation of Hi-Ethics, Inc., a coalition of the most

popular Internet health sites. The mission of Hi-Ethics is to create ethical standards related to patient privacy, health information content and advertising. After six months of intensive monthly meetings, Hi-Ethics produced a set of 14 measurable principles that ethical health content web sites should live by, and in May 2000 the membership of Hi-Ethics pledged to pursue voluntary compliance to those standards.

Voluntary compliance, however, did not adequately distinguish Hi-Ethics’ membership from the sea of other health web sites which lacked the coalition’s high standards. In May 2001, after assessing a number of responses to a Request for Information, Hi-Ethics partnered with URAC to create an accreditation program that could award a recognizable third party seal of approval for accredited web sites.

Hi-Ethics Partners with URAC to Reign in the Market

“We spoke with a number of organizations, but in the end we had the greatest confidence in URAC’s approach,” Kemper said. “URAC had the right balance between an objective, credible review coupled with the least amount of bureaucracy. Many health information web sites were struggling to make early business plans work—they wanted to do the right thing and seek accreditation, but they didn’t want to jump through unnecessary hoops. URAC proposed an objective but practical approach that would provide a true and credible accounting of compliance at a reasonable cost of time and money.”

As its first non-clinical accreditation, URAC’s board viewed web site accreditation as a new pathway with its own requirements. First, standards needed to be high, but reasonable in the context of a fairly new, immature market.

URAC SETS STANDARDS FOR HEALTH WEB SITE ACCREDITATION

The URAC Health Web Site Check-up and Accreditation is designed to give meaningful feedback to health web site owners on how to improve the quality of online operations, including standards for:

- Privacy and security
- Health content editorial processes
- Disclosure of financial relationships
- Linking policies
- Consumer complaints
- Emerging best practices

URAC’s Health Web Site Standards are available at www.urac.org.

Second, the process should be efficient and take advantage of the cutting-edge, electronic functionality of health care information technology. Third, it needed to be affordable.

Standards Development – A Multi-Step Process

“An important step in launching any new or revised accreditation program is determining what the appropriate threshold should be to effectively promote quality in a given market segment,” said Garry Carneal, president and CEO of URAC. “For example, setting the right standards for the security requirements embedded in URAC’s Health Web Site Accreditation Program, launched in December 2001, required some thought and strategy. As a result, URAC was able to set a realistic bar for most health care organizations in part by factoring into account that the HIPAA security rule implementation deadline was several years off in the future. Simply put, the goal was to empower URAC-accredited health Web sites to start implementing critical security

practices over a three year period in anticipation of the April 2005 deadline.”

Carneal said URAC’s charitable mission includes making Web site accreditation accessible to both small and large organizations pursuing their own nonprofit missions, including disease-oriented Web portals.

URAC uses a collaborative, team approach with organizations seeking any of its 16 accreditations. Then URAC works with the organization to build a client-specific accreditation application. The third step in the process is called “desktop review,” when URAC provides specific guidance to allow changes in non-compliant areas before formal submission to an accreditation committee. That committee, composed

of industry experts and stakeholders, determines final accreditation.

“Our reasoning is that all health care organizations that go through the URAC accreditation process gain some important benefits,” Carneal said. “In fact, every company that has applied for accreditation and has completed the process has made a concrete improvement in their internal operations and, as a result, should be able to point to a direct positive outcome from the accrediting experience. These operational enhancements not only benefit the company itself but also help a wide range of external stakeholders including patients and providers.” (see diagram 1 on page 5)

URAC Develops Quality-Based Health Information Technology Suite

Further changes in the market, including the Department of Health and Human Services’ requirements to meet HIPAA Privacy Standards by April 2003 and HIPAA Security Standards by April 2005, forced organizations to deal with security and privacy issues more comprehensively. URAC responded to these changes in 2003 with the addition of its HIPAA Privacy Accreditation and HIPAA Security Accreditation. Organizations can use this suite as an economical and educational way to reach compliance with all of HIPAA’s security requirements.

Currently, URAC is the only organization offering privacy and security accreditations based on the HIPAA Privacy and Security Rules. In this unique position, URAC commissioned an 18-month study of how organizations have implemented comprehensive security management programs to meet the requirements of the HIPAA Security Rule. The results of the study, published in April 2004, found that most organizations were not yet compliant with this rule, although the deadline for compliance is fast approaching.

In 2005, URAC’s Web Site Advisory Committee will update its Health Information Technology Accreditation standards to reflect further regulatory changes and market needs.

“Unlike the regulatory oversight of utilization management or health plan operations, there is no existing set of enabling state or federal laws that govern the full scope of Web site operations,” Carneal said. “URAC accreditation serves as a critical template setting forth essential operational and quality parameters of how a

“Accreditation provides a mechanism from a risk management perspective to ensure that the practices of a web site are in line with sound business and quality practices, such as monitoring operations through a quality management committee, controlling how personal health information is used or disclosed to third parties, setting forth a clearly defined editorial policy, distinguishing advertising from health content, establishing user complaint mechanisms, and identifying how the portal links to other web sites,” Carneal said.

health Web site should function. As a result, URAC accreditation can serve as a de facto substitute for regulation when no such regulation exists by creating nationally recognized standards – as is the case for URAC’s Health Web Site Accreditation Program.”

Accreditation makes business sense for anyone who posts health information on the Internet, and for any company which relies on the web for business-to-business health information transactions, Carneal said.

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NEW QUALITY STANDARDS FOR HEALTH WEB SITES SERVICES MILESTONES

- February 2000:** URAC board outlines ambitious quality agenda— includes pledge to develop health Web site standards
- June 2000** URAC and Internet Health Care Coalition co-sponsor eHeath focus groups to refine standards development strategy
- September 2000** URAC appoints members of health Web site advisory committee
- May 2001** URAC releases Harris Interactive/URAC sponsored consumer survey results—finds that consumers want assurance of reliability and quality
- May 2001** URAC and Hi-Ethics collaborate on health Web site accreditation based on 14 Hi-Ethics principles
- July 2001** URAC releases Harris Interactive/URAC sponsored consumer survey results—finds consumers want search engines that will help them locate high quality health information on the Web.
- July 2001** URAC releases quality standards for nation’s first independent accreditation program for health Web sites
- September 2001** URAC publishes comprehensive book on HIPAA’s privacy requirements
- November 2001** URAC, in partnership with the Internet Healthcare Coalition, releases book on eHealth ethics “The New Frontier: Exploring eHealth Ethics”
- December 2001** Nation’s first accredited health Web sites announced: Healthwise among the first along with WebMD, WellMed, IntelliHealth, the Health Insurance Association of America (HIAA), and Healthroads.
- July 2002** URAC announces that 32 million health plan members now benefit from URAC Web site accreditation
- January 2003** URAC expands focus on information and technology accreditation and pledges to create a series of information-based accreditation programs
- February 2003** URAC announces work with Consumer Webwatch to study search engines and work to improve the quality of online health
- February 2003** URAC releases draft HIPAA privacy standards for public comment--new program aimed at health care organizations committed to fair information practices and protection of health information privacy
- May 2003** URAC board approves first national HIPPA security accreditation standards- 10 companies in-process of seeking accreditation
- September 2003** URAC launches nation’s first health Web site “Check-Up” service—program offers feedback to health Web site owners on how to improve the quality of their online operations
- December 2003** URAC announces first companies to achieve HIPAA security accreditation--16 companies included in first wave
- June 2004** URAC forms marketing arrangement with American Health Insurance Plans (AHIP), AHIP Solutions for URAC’s suite of accreditation programs to include Health Web Site Accreditation, Check-Up and Security Assessment—expands URAC’s reach to 1,300 member health insurance plans under special pricing arrangement
- January 2005** URAC forms partnership with HIMSS to co-market URAC HIPAA Privacy, Security and Health Web Site Accreditation—expands URAC’s reach to the hospital sector

“URAC Develops” continued fom page 3

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It is generally understood that having URAC health web site accreditation is positive in terms of risk management. In fact, insurance companies such as Healthcare First, a unit of the Brokerage Services Division of Arthur J. Gallagher & Co., are offering premium discounts on eHealth liability coverage for all companies that pass URAC health web site accreditation. ACE Global Markets has established URAC accreditation as a requirement for underwriting Fines and Penalties Warranty Coverage for Privacy and Security Accreditation. And in October 2004, the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies announced that URAC-accredited organizations could obtain special terms, conditions and pricing on managed care errors and omissions policies. Under the terms of the arrangement with Chubb, URAC-accredited organizations are eligible for specialized policy wording and premium discounts of up to 5 percent.

Early Health Web Site Accreditation Adopter, First for Re-accreditation

“Healthwise was in the first group of web sites to earn URAC Health Web Site accreditation, and was the first to get its second approval. It has been valuable for us,” Kemper said. “We value our annual review. We put it in our marketing materials, and let our clients know about the URAC seal of approval.”

Partners in Standards Promotion – URAC and HIMSS

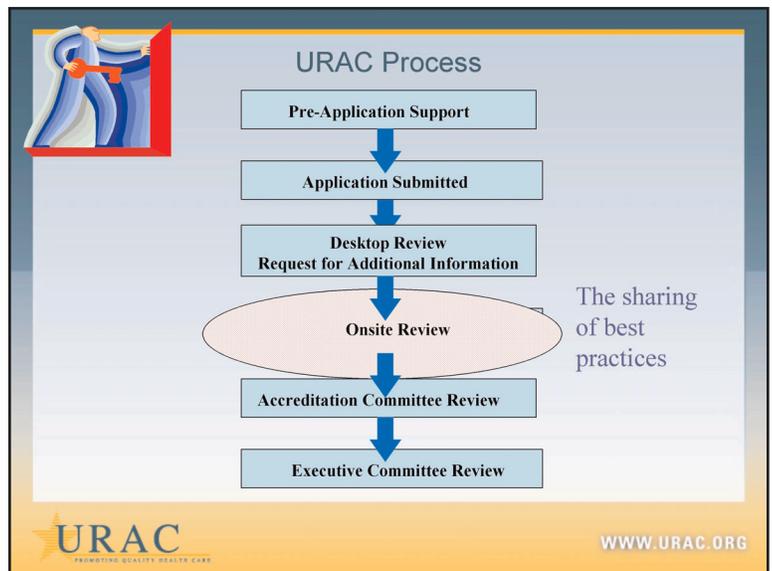
In January 2005, URAC and The Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) entered into a joint marketing agreement to promote the URAC Health Information Technology Accreditation Programs. The program brings URAC accreditation to the center of the hospital and health plan web site market, which Kemper said can only be a good thing.

“HIMSS has such a broad reach across the entire IT spectrum of health care, so I think this partnership is terrific,” said Don Kemper, chairman and CEO of Healthwise. “This should help make these standards become mainstream across all health care organizations.”

“HIMSS’ mission in promoting the use of health care information technology and management systems is clearly aligned with our ongoing mission to promote continuous improvement in the quality and efficiency of health care delivery,” Carneal said. “By choosing to market URAC’s Health Information Technology accreditation programs, HIMSS is helping to ensure that quality processes are integrated into health information technology across the health care industry.”

The marketing affiliation is a natural extension of each organization’s efforts to help their respective constituencies meet the HIPAA deadlines. Taking a leadership role to provide its members with resources and guidance for compliance, HIMSS has been actively advocating for implementation of HIPAA, which is designed to protect the security and confidentiality of medical records. URAC offers its Health Information Technology accreditation suite to help establish and maintain best practices in the health care industry. Both HIMSS and URAC have reinforced administrative simplification and resource support for health care organizations trying to meet the standards and deadlines for compliance with HIPAA. 

Diagram 1



References

- 1 “Pew Internet and American Life Project”, December, 2003. Available at www.pewInternet.org.
- 2 “The Health Hazards of Point-and-Click Medicine,” by Jane E. Brody. The New York Times, Aug. 31, 1999
- 3 E-MEDICINE – “Hailed as a Surgeon General, Koop Is Faulted on Web Ethics,” by Holcomb B. Noble. The New York Times, Sept. 5, 1999.
- 4 “An Assessment of HIPAA Security Preparedness: Most Health Care Organizations Remain Noncompliant,” URAC white paper, April 2004. Available at www.urac.org.

About Don Kemper, CEO, Healthwise

Donald W. Kemper founded Healthwise in 1975 with a vision of helping consumers make better decisions. He has co-authored five medical self-care and health promotion handbooks that together have sold more than 26 million copies. He created the vision for the Healthwise® Knowledgebase, a comprehensive electronic health information and decision support tool. Kemper is founder of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Information

Therapy, providing leadership for integrating information therapy into the health care delivery process. As founding chairman of Hi-Ethics, Inc. he participated in the drive for developing industry ethical standards for patient privacy, health information content, and advertising. He holds a master's degree in Health Systems Engineering from Georgia Institute of Technology and in Public Health from the University of California, Berkeley.

Healthwise is a non-profit organization that has been helping people make better health decisions since 1975. More than 60 million times a year, people turn to Healthwise information for help in making health decisions. Healthwise works with hospitals, employers, clinics, health plans and disease management companies to provide decision-support and self-management information to the people they serve. Healthwise is leading a major change in health care to prescribe information to patients as part of every health care encounter.



About Garry Carneal, JD, CEO, URAC

Garry Carneal, JD, MA is a leading expert in health care quality, including issues pertaining to the accreditation and regulation of managed care operations. Currently, Mr. Carneal serves as President & CEO of URAC, a non-profit, charitable organization devoted to the accreditation of health plans, PPO networks, utilization review activities, case management services, disease management functions, health call centers, independent review organizations, claims processing operations, workers' compensation managed care, and health web sites. Previously, Mr. Carneal has served as the Vice President of Legal and State Affairs

at the American Association of Health Plans, and Legislative Counsel for Health Policy for the National Association of Insurance Commissioners. Mr. Carneal has authored over 100 articles on health care issues and edited several health care books published by URAC. He frequently speaks at conferences and trade shows.

About URAC

URAC, an independent, non-profit organization, is a leader in promoting health care quality through accreditation and certification programs. URAC's standards keep pace with the rapid changes in the health care system, and provide a mark of distinction for health care organizations to demonstrate their commitment to quality and accountability. Through its broad-based governance structure and an inclusive standards development process, URAC ensures that all stakeholders are represented in setting meaningful standards for the health care industry. For more information, visit www.urac.org



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