Reviewer's report

Title: Assessment of function and clinical utility of alcohol and other drug web sites: An observational, qualitative study

Version: 1 Date: 10 December 2010

Reviewer: Trevor van Mielro

Reviewer's report:

> - Major Compulsory Revisions
> > The author must respond to these before a decision on publication can be reached. For example, additional necessary experiments or controls, statistical mistakes, errors in interpretation.
> >
> NONE

> - Minor Essential Revisions
> > The author can be trusted to make these. For example, missing labels on figures, the wrong use of a term, spelling mistakes.
> >
> 1. Methods: The study date should be included. This may be particularly important as Internet tools continue to expand rapidly and researchers will need to place findings within a historical context.
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> - Discretionary Revisions
> > These are recommendations for improvement which the author can choose to ignore. For example clarifications, data that would be useful but not essential.
> >
> > Please note that both the comments entered here and answers to the questions below constitute the report, bearing your name, that will be forwarded to the authors and published on the site if the article is accepted.
> >
> > Especially as large amounts of public funds have been dedicated to the
development of Internet-based interventions for Alcohol and Other Drug use (AOD), this paper can serve as a valuable contribution to the literature in this fast-growing field, and to researchers and other individuals who are considering constructing eHealth or web-based programs. Topical areas within the Discussion and Conclusion that are often overlooked by those who develop eHealth sites are: limiting text and presenting key messages on web program home pages, the limited time that Internet sites have to catch a visitor’s attention, the importance of the placement and use of graphics and colors, as well as the strategic structuring of navigation.

A further strength of this paper is the opportunity to tailor web-based programs for differing demographics, education levels, or ethnicities. The structured analysis of the focus group results is particularly strong and the authors may perhaps utilize this data to more clearly illustrate how targeted web-based programs have the potential to reach and effectively communicate with special populations, especially if content within these web programs are developed in partnership with the target group.

A potential weakness in the Discussion and Conclusion is a lack of discussion of Internet trends, costs of website maintenance, or keeping any web-based program current. As technology moves faster than science, any AOD Internet site that does not include a plan to expand or incorporate new technologies or communication methods will quickly become outdated. For example, social networking, the use of mobile phone technology, Facebook, and Twitter are mentioned by focus-group participants. First, it is expensive to incorporate these technologies and there is no guarantee that these technologies will prove efficacious or be attractive to users beyond 6-12 months. Second, there are significant privacy concerns in regards to all of these opportunities, and in any user-generated content vehicle there is the opportunity for outside forces to contaminate content or offer advice that is not evidence-based. Without the inclusion of these concerns this article may be ephemeral, and the valuable observations and analysis may be quickly outdated.

However, despite the above concerns this article can serve as a valuable reference for organizations seeking to develop AOD web programs, or provide guidance for researchers who are seeking to analyze how technology can make a population impact on society.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**
I serve as the Chief Executive Officer of Evolution Health Systems Inc., a company that develops and licenses eHealth and mHealth programs. However, the content of this paper will not effect Evolution Health financially, and is therefore not a competing interest.

Therefore, I declare that I have no competing interests.