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On: 10 December 2012, At: 12:45

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Journal of Consumer Health On the Internet

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wchi20>

### Healthlink BC: British Columbians Have Trusted Health Information at Their Fingertips <<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/kbaltindex.asp>>

Donna MacLeod <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Toronto Reference Library, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Version of record first published: 12 May 2009.

To cite this article: Donna MacLeod (2009): Healthlink BC: British Columbians Have Trusted Health Information at Their Fingertips <<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/kbaltindex.asp>>, Journal of Consumer Health On the Internet, 13:2, 173-179

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15398280902897046>

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## INTERNATIONAL HEALTH SITINGS

*Susan Murray, Column Editor*

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### **HealthLink BC: British Columbians Have Trusted Health Information at Their Fingertips <<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/kbaltindex.asp>>**

DONNA MACLEOD

*Toronto Reference Library, Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

*HealthLink BC, a multitopic consumer health information Web site from British Columbia, Canada, is a single point of access to nonemergency health information about diseases and conditions, healthy lifestyles, medication, and local health services. This column discusses the site's audience, its features, and how to navigate and search the site.*

*KEYWORDS* *British Columbia, Canada, consumer health information, HealthLink BC*

#### ABOUT THE AUDIENCE

HealthLink BC primarily addresses the needs of consumers, providing residents across the province of British Columbia (BC), Canada, a single point of access to nonemergency health information about diseases and conditions, healthy lifestyles, medication, and local health services. The province of BC is huge, accounting for about 10% of Canada's land surface. Larger than France and Germany combined, only about 30 countries in the world are larger than BC.<sup>1</sup> The population in 2008 was just over 4.4 million,<sup>2</sup> with

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Comments and suggestions should be sent to the Column Editor: Susan Murray (smurray@torontopubliclibrary.ca).

Address correspondence to Donna MacLeod, Preservation & Digitization Services, Toronto Reference Library, 789 Yonge Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4W 2G8. E-mail: dmacleod@torontopubliclibrary.ca

over half the population (2.6 million) living in the Vancouver (Mainland/Southwest) area.<sup>3</sup> The low population density in the rest of the province poses huge logistical challenges for the delivery of timely, accurate, and local information about health and health services.

## ABOUT THE WEB SITE

HealthLink BC was launched by the government of BC in 2001.<sup>4</sup> It is one of three main communication tools providing comprehensive, easy-to-understand consumer health information to residents of the province. The site is supported by print resources and by a telehealth service that connects residents directly to a nurse, a pharmacist, or a dietitian.

This Web site provides a wide range of up-to-date and quality-assessed information on a number of health topics, supported by the provincial government, the British Columbia Medical Association, the British Columbia College of Family Physicians, the College of Registered Nurses of British Columbia, and the College of Pharmacists of British Columbia.<sup>5</sup> In general, the links on the site point directly to resources contained within the Web site's databases or to British Columbian service agencies. Information about a health topic is comprehensive and generally includes contact information for local support services in BC or in Canada.

## GENERAL LAYOUT

The home page of site <<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/kbaltindex.asp>> is set up in a fairly standard manner: navigation elements appear across the top, along the left-hand side, and at the bottom. A small animation in the "CHECK your symptoms" area of the main window draws the eye, and clicking anywhere in this area pulls up the Interactive Health Symptom Checker. Select male or female and click on a body part or a menu item to get more information about a variety of problems associated with that part of the body. For example, clicking on the head area provides a list of symptoms related to head injuries, confusion, memory loss, dizziness, depression, headaches, and scalp problems.

While you can pull up the Symptom Checker by clicking anywhere in that general area of the screen, the other two options offered in the body of the screen ("LEARN about Health Topics and Medications" and "FIND services and resources") require users to type their search queries inside the boxes labeled "Enter health topic," "Enter medication name," "Enter keyword," or "Enter postal code."

## NAVIGATING THE SITE

The first option of the left-hand menu, “Health Topics A–Z,” displays a screen where you can either search the main menu or browse an alphabetic list. A second menu on the right-hand side allows you to select another range of options, including health topics, topics by category, symptom checker, medical test, interactive tools, and medications. For discussion purposes, I will select the topic “hemochromatosis,” a condition that occurs when too much iron builds up in the body.

When browsing the A–Z list (<<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/kbase/default.htm>>), clicking the letter “H” brings up a single alphabetic list of topics beginning with that letter, where a sub-menu allows you to navigate to various parts of the list (e.g., HA, HB, HC).

Selecting “hemochromatosis” from the list, which also includes the headings “Hemochromatosis Gene Test (HFE Test) [Medical Test]” and “Hemochromatosis Genetic Screening,” is straightforward. The page that comes up <<http://healthlinkbc.ca/kbase/topic/mini/hw180388/overview.htm>> is a comprehensive description of the disease, including symptoms, examinations and tests, an overview of treatments, home treatment options, and where to get help. Related information, references, and credits also appear.

The article on hemochromatosis includes 9 parts (topic overview, examinations & tests, treatment overview, home treatment, other places to get help, related information, references, credits). Navigation elements for the document appear on the right-hand side of the screen. An arrow clearly indicates the section currently displayed. At the end of the article, clicking a frequently asked question moves the reader quickly to the section of the document in which the answer appears.

Inside an article, clicking a link causes a small pop-up window to appear, defining the term or providing explanations. This pop-up window has no navigation features other than maximize, minimize, and close.

The “Healthy Living” option on the left-hand menu of the homepage displays program and statistical information for a number of health promotion topics such as physical activity, health eating, healthy pregnancy, and smoking cessation programs. “Common health concerns” links to population-specific information such as women’s, senior’s, and aboriginal health, as well as to health promotion topics such as immunization, travel health, emergency information, and links to government resources such as the Canada Food Guide. The “Dietitian Services” link provides information and contacts for this free telephone counseling service, while “Useful Links” provides a quite comprehensive listing of health care service agencies in BC. “Translated Resources” links to documents in French, Chinese, Punjabi, and Farsi, and provides information about translation services into 130 languages as well as services for deaf and hearing-impaired services.

Other links on the left-hand menu allow users to access printed resources and to contact the provincial ministries of Health Services and of Healthy Living and Sports. A free monthly newsletter addressing healthy living from a consumer perspective also appears on this menu.

### SEARCHING THE SITE

While the alphabetical listing is both effective and easy to use, the search function is not. When I searched for information about the same condition (hemochromatosis) from the search box on the front page, for example, I did not find the previously described listing at all. In eight pages of results, the actual topic page on hemochromatosis did not appear once. Of the ten results on the first page of search results for hemochromatosis, the first two items linked to different medical tests for iron, while the remainder of the listings on the first page (eight of them) linked to “Restrictive Cardiomyopathy.” In each entry, however, the word hemochromatosis did appear, bolded to make it easier to find.

When I searched for “hemochromatosis” from the “Health Topics A–Z” page, however, the listing that appeared was completely different; the term I sought appeared at the top of the list. This discrepancy may make it harder for consumers to find the help they need.

### DISCLAIMERS AND RESPONSIBILITY

HealthLink BC’s disclaimer is comprehensive, providing links to provincial government disclaimers including copyright, privacy, and the uses of personal information. Disclaimers specific to this site include the following statement:

The health information provided on the [www.HealthLinkBC.ca](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca) Web site is only a guide; your common sense and good judgment are also needed. If you receive professional advice in conflict with information here, follow the advice of your doctor or health professional as he/she is able to take your specific history and needs into consideration.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to this statement, the site states it will not endorse or recommend commercial products and that it is not responsible for information appearing on third-party sites, and delineates its relationships to Mediresource Inc. and to HealthWise.

Also, the first page and every search page clearly describe what an emergency is and provide telephone numbers for immediate assistance:

If you, or someone in your care, has chest pains, difficulty breathing, or severe bleeding, it could be life-threatening. Call 911 or the local

emergency number immediately. If you are concerned about a possible poisoning or exposure to a toxic substance, call Poison Control now, at 1-800-567-8911.<sup>7</sup>

### THIRD-PARTY INFORMATION PROVIDERS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

#### Consumer Medication Information

Canadian drug database (medication) information on this site is provided by MediResource Inc., a Canadian firm which provides detailed information on prescription medication in a number of languages.<sup>6</sup> This information is reviewed by doctors and pharmacists and developed by experts in health and medical information.

#### General Consumer Health Information

HealthLink BC clearly identifies the source and last review date of all information it presents. Partners retain ownership and copyright of their material.

The site uses information from the Healthwise<sup>®</sup> Knowledgebase, which employs experienced professional medical researchers, writers, and editors under the supervision of medical directors and a medical review board comprising more than 90 specialists. The editorial policy clearly states that information is evidence-based, presented in a balanced and unbiased manner, and free from commercial influences. Topics are written using a wide variety of information sources and reviewed by a medical director and at least one specialist in the area “to ensure accuracy and consistency with current practice standards and to identify areas of important development. These independent medical reviewers ensure that each topic contains accurate, unbiased information.”<sup>7</sup> Topics are reviewed either annually or once every two years, depending on how quickly research and treatment options evolve in an area. Each article provides author and reviewer names and the date of last review.

HealthLink’s goal is to help consumers find information so they can better understand their health issues and collaborate more effectively with health care practitioners to make more effective health care decisions. Here are some of the types of information it provides:

- Learning centers provide a single point of access to different types of information about complex topics such as asthma, teen health, or disease and injury prevention.
- Health and disease topics provide information about diseases and conditions or help consumers make decisions concerning, for example, exercise

or nutritional supplements. For diseases, an overview, symptoms, and treatment information are consistently provided.

- Decision points help consumers understand medical problems, testing, and treatment options; how to integrate decisions with their personal values and preferences; and how to interact with health care providers more effectively.
- Actionsets help consumers make healthy lifestyle changes by suggesting concrete, attainable steps they can take (e.g., making healthy food choices or quitting smoking). They answer the questions: what? why? how? and where?
- Images illustrate how the body works or how certain conditions affect the body.
- Interactive health tools include quizzes and calculators to help consumers evaluate their risks and behaviors.
- Symptom topics describe common symptoms such as headaches or diarrhea, listing types, potential causes, and related health conditions associated with them.
- Medical test information discusses why and how a procedure is done, how to prepare, how it feels, risks, results, and what might affect the test. A number of issues to consider are also suggested.

While efforts have been made to adapt the American information to a Canadian context, it is still recommended to search using American spelling. However, “the Healthwise Knowledgebase has been reviewed and revised by Healthwise in consultation with a Canadian team of experts for a Canadian audience. BC-specific information is also being added as links from selected Healthwise topics.”<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The HealthLink BC Web site provides a valuable service to its target population through an easy and effective menu-driven interface. It is updated frequently and reflects the Canadian and British Columbian health care system, creating connections between citizens and the services available in their area.

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