

Recommendation

Heidelberg Consensus Recommendations on Trustmarks

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In a workshop discussing the worldwide first publicly funded international trustmark project for health information on the web (MedCERTAIN), workshop participants discussed aims, possible benefits and concerns relating to trustmarks for health information on the web. The following document attempts to summarize the issues raised by participants.

Definition of a trustmark

Any certificate, symbol, sign, based on information or meta-information (information about information) provided by a third-party that is aiming

- to enhance peoples trust into a certain product, service, relationship, information provider or piece of information perceived as being trustworthy by the organisation issuing the trustmark; and/or
- to enhance the ability of people to evaluate the trustworthiness of information, services or products.

Purpose of a trustmark for health information on the web

There is agreement that in medicine there is no absolute truth, so that in practice the evaluation of quality criteria such as "accuracy" of health information poses huge practical barriers. In addition, information on the web is dynamic in nature. The primary aim of a trustmark would therefore not be to provide a guarantee for information correctness or usefulness, but to enhance trust into the information provider.

Potential benefits of trustmarks

As has been stated in the Heidelberg Collaboration statement of purpose, we agree that an important goal for us is to assure and to continuously improve the quality of health information on the Internet.

We agree that there could be a role for a trustmark in this process,

- as health information providers may learn from the interaction between the experts from the organisation issuing the trustmark, the information provider and the user
- as the mere existence of a trustmark may be an additional incentive for a health information provider to improve internal quality management procedures and to adhere to principles of best practice
- as a trustmark may contribute to protect people and enhance their health by providing information for decision making

Problems

1. Lack of experience with trustmarks and lack of evidence for the effectiveness or impact of trustmarks

We also agree that we have no actual evidence for saying whether and under which conditions trustmarks may create more benefit than harm, and that any project trying to implement a

trustmark concept has to be carefully evaluated for the impact of its service on people and information providers.

2. Business models

Another problem is the absence of experience with business models which could make sure the financial viability and internal quality control of such services.

A business model that is based on letting information providers pay for evaluation should not disadvantage information providers which are unable to pay a fee.

3. Legal problems

Any trustmark concept should take into account potential legal risks, possible risk management strategies and, where appropriate, dispute resolution mechanisms.

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###Reviewer names will be inserted here### published 13.09.00.

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