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## Editorial

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In 2007 a survey conducted by the Pew Internet Research Institute found that 75% of internet users in the USA had used the internet to search for health or medication information (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008). Indeed, a similar survey based in the UK revealed that 27% of internet users had accessed the internet for health-related information in the past three months (Office for National Statistics, 2008). However, amongst this growing number of people turning to the internet for information, advice and support are those who access and actively participate in health-related virtual communities. In fact, a 2005 survey conducted in the USA found that 36 million people were members of a virtual community.

In the context of health, virtual communities may have some particularly helpful features which may play a part in explaining their rise in popularity. For example, they are typically anonymous, asynchronous and help to transcend geographical and temporal barriers which may be a particular issue for some patient groups, e.g. those living with a disability. However, we know little about such communities and it is only recently that we have witnessed a growing number of publications devoted to exploring this growing phenomenon. We are therefore delighted to offer a special issue '*Virtual communities and healthcare*' which we hope will add to the emerging body of literature in this area. The special issue has five fascinating papers which consider various aspects of the health-related virtual community experience.

- 1 We begin our special issues with a paper by Fiona Fox and colleagues who consider some of the issues underpinning disclosure by young people living with psoriasis. Through their qualitative analysis they were able to identify the forms of support exchanged between group members and how disclosure was used as a tool to both provide and elicit support.
- 2 Our next paper by Carol Percy and Sarah Murray is the first of three papers which examine the content of messages posted by members of health-related virtual communities. In their paper which considers polycystic ovary syndrome we get a fascinating insight into the psychosocial concerns of those who live with this

condition and how, and to what extent, the virtual community was able to address the support needs of its members.

- 3 The third paper by Heather Buchanan and colleagues explores the journey undertaken by those individuals living with severe dental anxiety/phobia. Again, through an analysis of the messages posted by members we obtain a unique insight into the challenges faced by this patient group at various points in the often long and difficult road towards overcoming their fear. It is clear from both this and the previous paper that health-related virtual communities are important sources of information and support for their members.
- 4 The next paper by Elizabeth Sillence extends our exploration of the communication which takes place by group members by examining the process of advice giving in a cancer support group. It does this through a discourse analysis of messages and in so doing highlights a group who collectively see advice giving as one their key functions and illustrates the means by which members develop mechanisms for portraying their competence and trustworthiness.
- 5 The fifth paper by Priya Nambisan and colleagues addresses the impact of participation within virtual communities and how this may, if at all, be related to attitudes towards healthcare organisations. Such a paper is an important contribution to our understanding of how health-related virtual communities may impact on other aspects of the healthcare system and its utilisation and provides an excellent conclusion to this special issue.
- 6 The final paper of this issue by Piet Kommers targets the bridge between health- and creative-oriented web communities. Its link is vital in order to allow readers and next coming authors to understand how and why creativity among community members is needed in order to optimise synergetic effects in these social aggregations the next era of social media development. In this role this paper preludes the succeeding special issue, entirely dedicated to social mechanisms for creative support in web-based communities.

## References

- Office for National Statistics (2008) 'Internet access 2008: individuals and households', available at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfd>.
- Pew Internet & American Life Project (2008) 'The engaged e-patient population', available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/The-Engaged-Epatient-Population.aspx>.