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## **“WHAT CAN BE SAID AT ALL CAN BE SAID CLEARLY”<sup>1</sup>: FAQ AS A STARTING POINT IN BROWSING HEALTH WEB SITES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Health information is increasingly accessible via the Internet, and the number of end users who access health resources remotely is on the increase. Changes in user behaviour drive a corresponding change in the way information must be delivered to meet their needs. The FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) or help, tips sheets, section can be one of the most useful tools in order to transmit information to the users also giving them an easier access to local and international electronic information resources.

Starting from a daily experience on health Web site searching, it was noticed that the use of a well organized FAQ section improves Web site usability. A review on a wide range of health Web sites was conducted in order to analyse how and if this new medium of conveying information has been built and organized.

This review will show the different approaches in compiling FAQ by Web site developers and presents a list of a wide range of issues that could be included in a FAQ section. Collected statistical data will be given to show the current situation and to establish a quality methodology user oriented providing a formal organization of this kind of information.

**KEYWORDS:** Internet, FAQ, quality, public health Web sites

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 1922

## INTRODUCTION

During the last years the Internet has become an important source of health information. The number of individuals seeking health information on the Internet is growing at a rate that exceeds the rate of overall Web usage. It is estimated that in 2002, with a growing rate of 34%, Internet health sites were among the fastest growing of all monitored types of sites. It is also estimated that seventy-odd per cent of people search online for health-related information for their decision making. Concomitant with the emergence of new media technologies, consumers are becoming increasingly assertive in health care decision-making and in demanding increased access to a wide range of health information and social support resources. Moreover, the Web is used as a source of information and for the dissemination of information by many different public and private organizations. In particular, the concept of e-health has come to assume a key place within a larger Italian governmental discourse that lauds the benefits of supplying Internet-based services to as wide an audience as possible. In order to fulfil its visions of connected public accessing services cheaply and easily through electronic media, the government has assumed that the potential exists for all Italians to use the Internet, and has done its best to achieve this result through programmes aimed at ameliorating accessibility issues.

An e-health information service offers the following advantages:

- service is easily accessible wherever there is Internet access
- capability to reach both local and remote users
- distributed service
- meets users expectations
- extended hours of service

However a public e-health information service is more than the resources it offers and the aggregation of hardware and software that manages them, it is also a collection of services developed with users in mind, although those users may be hard to define.

The new communication medium involving changes in user behaviour drives a corresponding change in the way information must be organized and delivered to meet their needs.

For these reasons it's very important that health Web site developers pay attention to the information architecture in terms of a Web site sufficiently intuitive to enable users to find answers to concerns such as: Where can I find ...?

### ***AIMS AND OBJECTIVES***

This paper examines the issues surrounding the provision of electronic health information and services and describes an evaluation undertaken of a number of Italian Local Health Authorities Web sites.

Due to the unregulated nature of the Internet, users can feel that the information they are accessing may be incomplete or misleading. Moreover, too much or unorganized information could create confusing effects on users who may not be able to use this tool in the correct manner. Starting from a daily experience on health Web sites searching, it was noticed that the use of a well organized FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section improves information retrieval, particularly if the FAQ section is extensive and searchable. With a searchable FAQ section, users can jump directly to what they are interested in and skip what does not pertain to their needs. This study is focusing on FAQ as a vehicle of information creation, distribution and access. FAQ are collections of questions and answers on a topic originated in the early 1980s as the means to give informed answers to the recurring questions that were continually asked in the discussion newsgroups called Usenet. Now, however, FAQ have evolved into extremely sophisticated collections of information on virtually any subject, becoming highly refined and involving whole hierarchies of contributing teams and editors. The Web is a natural extension, home, and “delivery system” or vehicle for the FAQ section. FAQ were already very tightly organized based on tables of contents and could easily be converted to the hypertext form.

In this study FAQ sections or similar formats were analysed in order to assess how information is categorised, labelled and presented and how navigation and access are facilitated.

Web-based information seems to become increasingly effective in health field as a vehicle for communication between governmental administration and people. Italy’s National Health System (Servizio Sanitario Nazionale) is administered by Local Health Authorities which have the task of planning and organizing services to citizens at a basic level and play a fundamental role in terms of users’ information needs. This paper provides an evaluation of the Italian Local Health Authorities Web sites with the purpose of analysing if and how this new medium of conveying information has been built and organized.

## METHODOLOGY

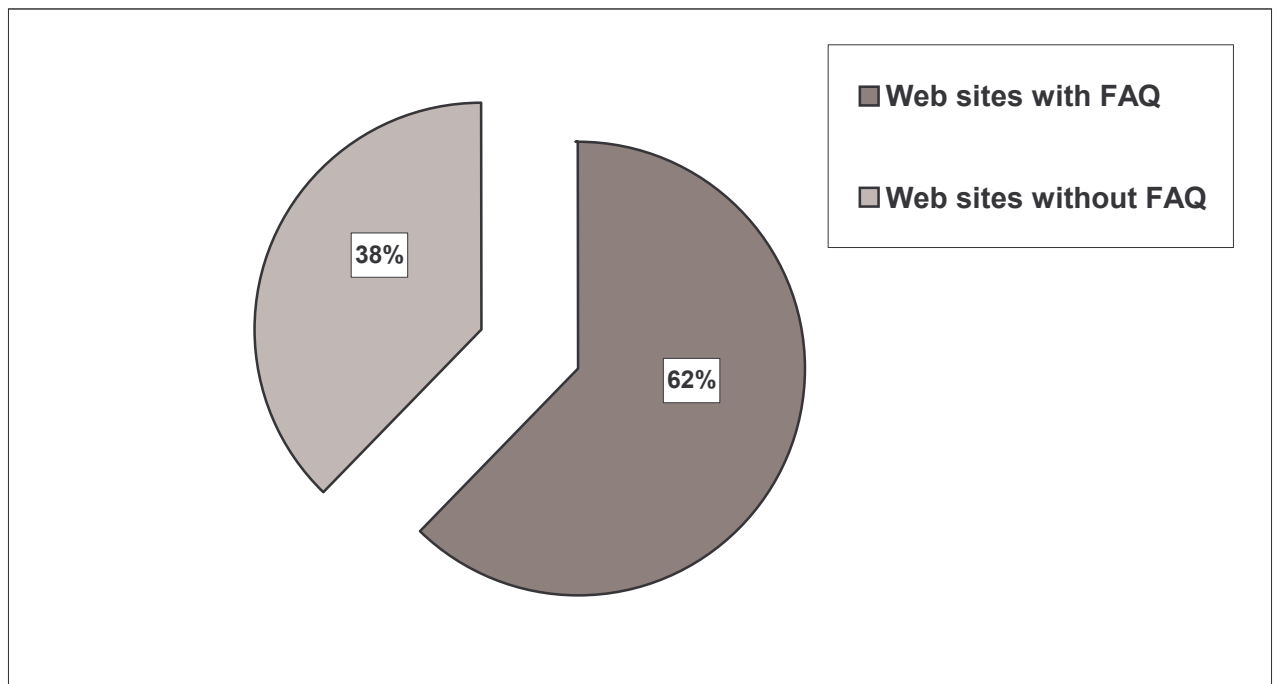
161 Italian Local Health Authorities Web sites were checked to assess what types of information were being distributed about their services to citizens. The analysis also examined the way this information was organized and located.

Data gathering was accomplished navigating through the Web sites and evaluating:

- the presence of the FAQ section in the Web site
- the FAQ typology and format
- the FAQ labelling and categorization
- the location of the FAQ section

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis results showed that out of 161 Italian Local Health Authorities Web sites, 100 Web sites communicate information contents to their users through FAQ or similar formats.



**FIG 1: Italian Local Health Web sites: general analysis of the FAQ section**

The FAQ typology ranges from basic explanations regarding the services offered to an extensive list of services related to the different kinds of users. Usually the most recurring topics are prevention services, general and specialist medicine and hospital care. Besides, other specific information involving citizens' needs, such as health certificates and medical devices are given.

It's important to underline that only 29 Web sites identify this useful medium of conveying information with a "FAQ" label. As a matter of fact the remaining 71 Web sites present the same kind of information through a myriad of different labels as listed below:

- Guide to services
- Access procedures
- Find a service
- Practical guide for the citizen
- How to do...
- What to do...
- Find me a ...
- Friendly information counter
- Full A to Z topics listing
- To know more
- Health issues
- Do your search
- Useful information
- Useful pages
- Services for the citizens
- Patient/user information
- Citizen's information counter
- Practical information
- General information
- Glossary

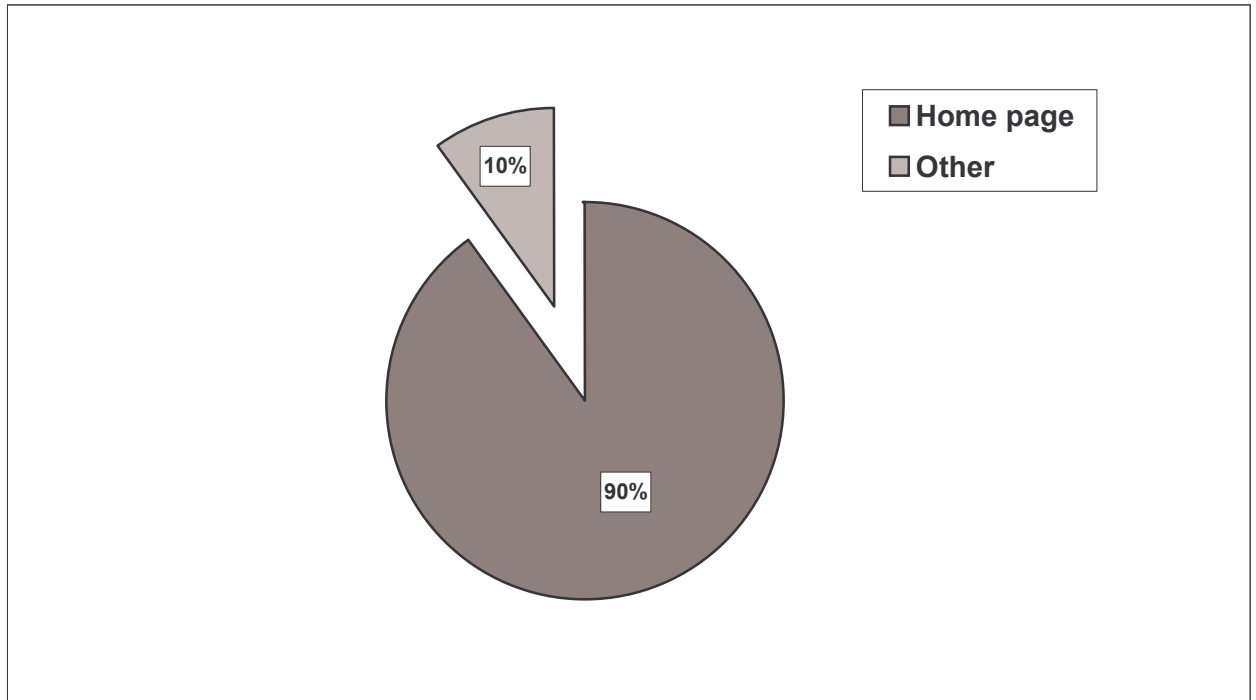
As the above list shows, information regarding health issues was organized under very different labels and, sometimes, in very different manners. All of those different ways of labelling the same kind of information may be misleading, confusing or create a conflict in mental models, because in general individuals seeking information in health Web sites expect to find a standard menu of information retrieval.

Referring to information architecture, it was noticed that in some Web sites the answers to information requests are organized in a database structure and can be searched online by words or phrases, in others, they can be browsed in alphabetical order. Other Web sites take advantage of the interactivity to accomplish communication allowing users to ask questions and get answers electronically.

In general, all the questions and answers are structured using a simple, clear and accurate language. Grammar and spelling are very important. Poor grammar can cause ambiguities and make it difficult for the reader to understand the meaning of the content. Spelling mistakes are distracting and can also create confusion. It's important to underline that the drive to organize and present information in the most efficient and simple way is the key to FAQ.

Another analysed issue is the location of the FAQ section. It is interesting to point out that 90 of the analysed Web sites have a link to the FAQ section in their home page. A home page acts as a gateway into a Web site providing all users with a place to begin their work. Features that facilitate use of the site should be easy to find and, obviously, the first place where individuals who visit Web sites for health information, expect to find the FAQ on the home page.

Lately, the distinction of the difference between a Web page and a FAQ section has blurred significantly. Even a home page, a seemingly unique characteristic of the Web, can be thought of as a very specialized FAQ section that answers question such as "What is my health care district?" or "What is the emergency call number?".



**FIG 2: Italian Local Health Web sites: FAQ location.**

## CONCLUSIONS

People are generally impatient especially when their task is to retrieve useful information, most want to jump quickly to the bottom line that will answer their immediate information needs, they want answers fast and easy. The response of public health Web site developers should be the Frequent Asked Questions section.

In the Web, FAQ represent the best and fastest point of contact between archived and searched information. Under this new perspective, and in the light of the FAQ section which has become a defined and well-understood cyber genre, all health Web site developers should organize and present information utilizing this new medium of conveying information.

Even if no rule exists about issuing a list of FAQ, it's possible to summarize the goals that need to be achieved when constructing an extensive list of FAQ:

- visibility
- simplicity
- pertinence
- ease of search
- updating

- feedback

It's important to keep in mind that information must be accurate and not misleading, easy to understand and up to date. Web site developers must also present information in ways that make it easy to retrieve.

The experience shows that the best performance in retrieving information is given through a well organized database allowing users to pick up the needed information searching online by words or phrases in simple language.

Last but not least, Web site developers must make reasonable efforts to monitor their own performance, and give visitors meaningful ways to provide feedback. Sites must make it easy for users to bring problems to the site's attention by clearly indicating how to contact the staff involved. As the FAQ section is a work in progress, feedback could be useful also to expand the topics covered and to set up a user oriented FAQ list.

It is to be hoped the employment of well trained and dedicated staff in receiving questions and preparing answers will improve this fundamental public service and result in better user satisfaction.

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