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## News

### What patients are searching for 10.12.20

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**A new tool called "search listening" has been hailed a game-changer in the pharma industry's efforts to become more patient centric by giving detailed information on what patients really want to know but may be too shy to ask their doctor.**

However, to make the best of the new approach, industry regulation must be reformed. Luckily, search listening itself may be able to provide the ammunition needed to drive change.

Brand Medicine International CEO Julia Walsh said search listening is so effective, it's been likened to reading patients' minds, tapping into the precise information they are seeking about specific pharmaceutical products and the diseases they treat.

The tool involves comprehensive monitoring and collation of searches that patients put into Google - often the first port of call when symptoms appear or when patients have questions about the medicines they have been prescribed.

"There are questions being asked every single day by patients that would blow our minds - it's a big blind spot for the industry and it's one that's so easy to tackle," she said.

"There are really interesting questions being asked around diseases online that I don't think any of us even thought that people are asking. A very common question about diabetes is, 'is it contagious?' And there are questions around specific products like: 'Can **Humira** cause miscarriage? Can **Viread** cause erectile dysfunction?' 'Can you crush **Pradaxa**?'

Walsh, who compiles search listening reports for the health industry, said alarmingly all too often the information patients find online in response to their questions lacks credibility or is downright dangerous.

"The other amazing capability of search listening is that not only can you see the questions people are asking but you can follow them down the rabbit hole - you can actually see what Google serves back to them as their first page. And when you go the answers they're getting online, they're woeful.

"So what industry can do is say: this is what our patients are finding out when they do these searches, and that's not answering their questions - we can do a better job than what's there on the landing page.

"If you know the questions patients are asking about your disease category or your product, you can create content using that question as your title and then search engine optimisation will feed back your content to them on page one."

Walsh said search listening provides a distinct advantage over the better known social listening, which taps into what patients are saying on social media and is often completely different to what they are privately searching for using search engines.

"Patients are not being heard because pharma is listening to the wrong conversations," Walsh said.

"But when you follow through the search queries, I feel that as an industry we let people down. I click on the pages they're taken to and think - really, is that what patients are getting in response to that question? Does the manufacturer know that's where the patient is going?

"There's a lot of work to be done."

#### Legislation shake-up

Walsh is calling for a federal government review of the tight regulations that prevent the Australian pharma industry from speaking directly to patients about their products and believes search listening provides the "ammunition" needed for a shake-up.



"In Australia we don't have the regulations that allow us to be there and this is one of my big, audacious goals - to use search listening to illustrate for government where patients are going when they're asking these questions online.

"We can show government irrefutably that they are being taken to UK websites, US websites, Indian websites - they're being taken all over the place.

"For example, I worked on **Lyrica** and that was one of the big problems - patients are prescribed something, they go online to look it up and because we weren't allowed in Australia to create information online available to patients, they were being taken to the US website where the dosing and the indications are different.

"This is actually finally a way to give evidence of the patient informational experience to prove why we need to allow legislation for pharma to have patient focused information online for Australian patients. That's my next challenge."

Walsh intends to build a report to illustrate the patient journey across a range of critical categories giving concrete proof that the information they are reaching is inadequate or worse.

"We need to put it in front of Greg Hunt and say 'look, it's time.' I don't think to date we've had any way to prove that there's a real problem with this. I feel this is the key that will unlock that.

"We have a responsibility to give people the answers they need and at the moment they're being taken to random blogs."

**Christine Spiteri**

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