

INITIATION OF WEB-BASED TRIAGE IN A COLLEGE HEALTH SETTING

Mary Lou Sole, PhD, RN, CCNS, FAAN; Michael Deichen, MD; Terry Wheeler, MS, Claudia Witcher, RN, BSN

University of Central Florida School of Nursing and Student Health Services
P.O. Box 162210, Orlando, FL 32816-2210

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Purpose. The purpose of this study was to establish the viability, and describe the initiation and utilization of a web-based triage system, 24/7 WebMed, in a college health setting. While phone-based triage systems have been used for many years, web-based triage systems provide a new technology for assisting clients in decision making and providing health-related information. Individuals, especially those of college age, increasingly rely on the Internet for healthcare information. Interactive web-based triage can possibly assist the user in assessing the urgency for seeking healthcare and provide a source of health information.

Methods. The 24/7 WebMed web-based triage system became fully operational in February 2004 via a secure web site through the University Student Health Services. The Institutional Review Board at the University approved the study. Only students with valid University network identification can enter the site. Upon entering the site, students agree that de-identified data may be used for research purposes. Students answer questions about their symptoms, and are given recommendations regarding seeking care (emergent—911, immediate, 12-24 hours, 2-3 days, 1-2 weeks, or self-care). The site also provides an extensive library of health-related information. The following data are recorded from the system: date, time, age, chief complaint, duration of problem, and triage recommendation. Data from 2/6/04 through 3/23/04 were compiled for analysis. Descriptive and non-parametric statistics were computed for preliminary data analysis.

Findings. During the first 6 weeks of operation, 606 students recorded 794 encounters. The mean age was 22 years, and 70% of students were female. Most encounters (79%) were recorded Monday through Friday. The top 10 chief complaints were as follows: sore throat, chest pain, headache, cough, pain urination, vaginal discharge, abdominal pain, genital irritation, eye pain, and abdominal pain. Urgent or immediate care was recommended in 34% of encounters, while self-care was recommended in 22% of encounters.

Discussion. Initiation of the 24/7 WebMed triage in a college health setting provides a way to assist students in decision making about seeking care. Over one-third of those using the system in the first six weeks were referred for emergent or immediate care, providing earlier access to care. Recommendations for self-care may prevent unnecessary use of healthcare services. Knowledge of frequent inquiries can provide cues as to healthcare and educational needs for the college population. Additional research will validate accuracy of the system, students' follow-up with recommendations, and student satisfaction with the system.