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«Machtfaktor Patient 3.0» – Patienten verändern das Gesicht des Gesundheitswesens

"The power of patients 3.0" – Patients are changing the face of health care

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Understanding the therapeutic potential of peer online support communities: a narrative review

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**Teaser:** Online peer support communities have a number of therapeutic benefits which arise as a result of various therapeutic processes. However, evidence is limited and further research is required.

**Background, objective:** In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of patients living with long-term physical and mental health problems as well as problem behaviours who seek information, advice and support from online patient communities. As a consequence, there has been a notable increase in the number of studies that have explored aspects of the new online behaviour including: predictors of engagement, the online experience and therapeutic outcomes.

**Approach, methods, patient engagement:** A narrative review of the online support community literature.

**Findings:** Studies examining online peer support communities were identified across a wide range of long-term health conditions, for young people, adults and those in later life. Asynchronous online discussion forums were the most popular community, evident with membership ranging from <10 members to >10'000. The majority of communities were moderated either by a volunteer patient living with the condition or a health professional. A number of empowering processes may be present within online support communities, though studies differ in terms of those identified. Similarly, participation may contribute to a range of empowering outcomes (e.g. finding recognition, being better informed, enhanced social well-being etc.), though studies appear to vary in terms of constructs included for analysis. The majority of research has been cross-sectional or employed a qualitative approach with few adopting a longitudinal approach or RCT design. As a consequence, caution must be exercised when considering the potential benefits to patients from their use.

**Discussion and implications:** This narrative review has identified possible mechanisms through which patients may be empowered through their engagement with online support communities. However, the review clearly signals the need for more research that employs longitudinal and/or RCT designs. In the absence of such work, evidence for the therapeutic benefits of online support communities remains limited. Similarly, future research needs to fully examine how best to conceptualize the notion of therapeutic potential in order to develop an agreed set of useful indicators of patient empowerment.

**Key terms:** internet online support patient chronic illness