

Significant lack of public trust in online health information revealed - According to new research conducted by MSD Ireland & Ipsos MRBI

- Just 15% of respondents consider healthcare websites to be very trustworthy with only 4% considering social media to be a very trustworthy source of healthcare information
- Calls for 'Verified Trust Mark' on healthcare information websites to combat low levels of trust in online healthcare information among patients
- Almost two-thirds of 18-34 year olds actively seeking online health advice compared to one-third of over 55's

Dublin, 7th March 2019: New research launched today has revealed a significant lack of trust amongst the general public in the health and medical information they consume online, with only 15% of those polled considering health websites to be very trustworthy. Levels of trust in social media and online discussion forums are revealed to be even lower with just 4% and 5% of respondents, respectively, seeing these sources as very trustworthy for healthcare information.

The results were revealed as part of new research from Ipsos MRBI and commissioned by MSD Ireland. Entitled "*The Right Click? Exploring Trust in Online Health Information*", the research examined the views of a nationally representative sample of Irish people into the impact of easily accessible information in managing our health and reveals significant public support (73%) for the introduction of a registered trust mark confirming that health information online has been verified by a recognised medical authority.

Despite this lack of trust in online sources, the study reveals a range of new behaviours when it comes to consuming health information, with more than half (53%) of respondents going online to check out medical or healthcare information in the last 12 months. This is particularly true of younger consumers, with almost two-thirds of 18-34 year olds going online for health advice, compared to just over one-third of those aged 55 and over. In terms of frequency, the average number of times the public has gone online for health information in the last 12 months was five.

Interestingly, of those that looked up health information online before seeking professional advice, nearly half (46%) said they felt worse, rather than better (40%).

The research was released as part of MSD Ireland's '*My Healthcare, My Future*' series of research reports and follows a 2016 study into the general public's vision for healthcare provision in Ireland.

Commenting on the report, **Chair of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Communications Climate Action and the Environment Hildegarde Naughton TD**, said:

"Increasing numbers of people are researching healthcare information online, but this report shows there is still an inequality in the way we access information and our capabilities to understand and evaluate it. There is no easy answer to the issue of regulating digital content, but as policy makers we have to focus on expanding the public's capabilities so they can take better control over the information - the internet can be a great tool when it comes to managing our personal health, but only if used adequately.

This is a discussion we need to have collectively, and that is why research like this is an important stepping stone to determining how we can make the most of online platforms. In the end, what we have to do is shorten the distance between the public and the reliable, good quality, verified information that is already out there in order to improve their quality of life and that of their families."

The research highlights the ongoing importance of traditional, interpersonal interactions in imparting health information, with 84% of respondents believing their GP or family doctor to be a very trustworthy source, followed by a medical or surgical consultant (78%) and pharmacist (68%). Furthermore, 77% of those polled said that they would visit a website if recommended by their healthcare professional.

At the launch of the report, **Ger Brennan, Managing Director, MSD Ireland (Human Health)** said: *“This research is a comprehensive review of the Irish public’s perceptions and attitudes towards healthcare information. Digital platforms and social media have opened many doors when it comes to accessing and sharing healthcare information, but widespread online practices such as fake news and misinformation can also pose real threats to the public’s health.*

With this research report, MSD hopes to shine a light on the way people approach online and offline healthcare resources and determine what the industry can do to support patients. We want to contribute to an inclusive debate that helps us, both from an industry and government perspective, devise effective solutions that will ensure high-quality, reliable and objective information is readily available for all.”

Commenting on the findings, **Dr Maitiu O Tuathail, President of the National Association of General Practitioners** said, *“There is no doubt that access to health information and resources online has had a positive impact on how people actively manage their health. The research released today however reveals a significant lack of trust in the health information people are consuming online and emphasises the importance of seeking professional medical help and guidance on all health matters. Oftentimes, search parameters can be vague and poorly defined, with the findings leading to uncertainty and sometimes adding unnecessary worry to a prospective patient. The appetite for a registered trust mark for health information online shows a desire from the general public for more guidance on what information to trust and what to disregard.”*

Professor Brian O’Neill, Director and Dean of the Graduate Research School, TU Dublin said, *“Media literacy and the ability for patients and users in general to understand the vast quantity of information online can be overwhelming. We too need to be considerate of ‘who’ exactly is accessing this information, with younger and more vulnerable individuals all having access to highly complex and intricate medical information online. Almost two-thirds of 18-34 year olds are going online for health advice, and just over one-third of those aged 55 and over.*

With the Ipsos / MSD research highlighting a significant number of patients accessing healthcare information online, it is imperative that individuals empower themselves to identify and understand the appropriate resources and to consult a medical professional on anything they might not understand or trust. GP’s and healthcare professionals can also work with patients to help them identify the online resources most relevant to them from trusted, easily-understood and reliable sources. A ‘verified trust mark’ on communications in conjunction with healthcare bodies such as GP’s, could help to combat the low levels of trust seen from the research data.”

The report was launched at a business breakfast this morning, followed by a panel discussion involving key experts from across the healthcare and technology industries. Moderated by RTÉ’s Audrey Carville, the panel included *Dr Maitiú O’Tuathail*, President at National Association of General Practitioners, *TD Hildegard Naughton*, Chairperson of Oireachtas Committee for Communications, Climate Action & Environment and *Professor Brian O’Neill*, Director and Dean of the Graduate Research School, TU Dublin.

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Research Methodology

Ipsos MRBI conducted this programme of research in partnership with MSD Ireland over the course of 2018. The research consisted of three phases: focus group discussions with the general public; telephone survey with the general public; and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.

This report combines the results of all phases, focusing predominantly on the views of the general public from both the qualitative focus groups and quantitative survey, supplemented where appropriate with contributions from healthcare stakeholders.

About MSD

MSD, known as Merck & Co. Inc., Kenilworth, NJ, USA in the US and Canada, has operations in more than 140 countries. MSD employs approximately 2,000 people across its sites in Ireland, which encompass manufacturing, R&D, commercial and marketing facilities in addition to global support services.

As a global leader in healthcare, we are dedicated to helping the world be well through a wide range of innovative health solutions. This includes the development, production and distribution of prescription medicines, vaccines and biologic therapies as well as animal health products. We also drive and support the on-going development of patient support initiatives.

Our core values are driven by the desire to improve life, achieve scientific excellence, operate with the highest standards of integrity, expand access to our products, and employ a diverse workforce that values collaboration. Many of the most widely used MSD medicines are developed by our teams in Ireland, with over 50% of MSD's global top 20 products now manufactured here in Ireland. We have invested hugely in the Irish market and our Irish sites are highly regarded, and renowned, by our colleagues across the globe.